

## **Foundations of Our Faith**

**November 3, 2024 ~ All Saints Day**

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### **John 1:32-44**

32 Then John gave this testimony: "I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. 33 And I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.' 34 I have seen and I testify that this is God's Chosen One." The next day John was there again with two of his disciples. 36 When he saw Jesus passing by, he said, "Look, the Lamb of God!" 37 When the two disciples heard him say this, they followed Jesus. 38 Turning around, Jesus saw them following and asked, "What do you want?" They said, "Rabbi" (which means "Teacher"), "where are you staying?" 39 "Come," he replied, "and you will see." So they went and saw where he was staying, and they spent that day with him. It was about four in the afternoon. 40 Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, was one of the two who heard what John had said and who had followed Jesus. 41 The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, "We have found the Messiah" (that is, the Christ). 42 And he brought him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him and said, "You are Simon son of John. You will be called Cephas" (which, when translated, is Peter). **Jesus Calls Philip and Nathanael** 43 The next day Jesus decided to leave for Galilee. Finding Philip, he said to him, "Follow me." 44 Philip, like Andrew and Peter, was from the town of Bethsaida

I am not aware of how often you have observed All Saints Day here at UBC. There is something about All Saint's Day that always makes many Protestants feel a bit uncomfortable. That is because it was something began back in the fourth century in the Roman Catholic Church to commemorate those who had died as martyrs for the faith. It later was amended to include those people who had performed some miracle or other feat of special spiritual significance and had died and was now in heaven.

In fact, it comes as a surprise to some people that there is an All-Saint's Day in Protestant churches, because we are part of the tradition of Reformation churches who, back in the sixteenth century, sometimes politely and sometimes impolitely, petitioned the Church to get the saints out of the way. Back then we protested against the "*saints business*" because it had become a business (one that brought great monetary profit to the church), and because of that biblical passage which said, "*There is one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human*" (I Tim. 2:5). We were not interested in saints of heaven assisting the work of those saints in training down here on earth.

Perhaps All Saints' Day is somewhat unsettling because we balk at the word saint itself. When we hear it, we think of some holy person—out of all the great spiritual heroes of the past—whose shoes we could never fill, so different from us and so removed from where we live our lives. Sometimes the term *saint* is used to indicate a promotion process, like being elevated to brigadier general in the Lord's army. Some saints have even been demoted back again to colonel if they were able to gain only local popularity. At any rate, such customs surrounding the term *saint* have not been followed in the churches of the Reformation, and therefore the practice of celebrating All Saints' Day still leaves some unsettled.

But actually, we do use the word *saint*, even in our common conversation. How often have you heard someone say, "*That person is a saint.*" Maybe we grew up a little skeptical of the word because it was used to describe someone—like one of our relatives—whom we just happened to know all too well. Your Uncle Elmer, for example, someone may say was a saint. But you know that Uncle Elmer bossed his wife around, kicked the dog, demolished his business competitors, drank too much, and smoked the biggest black cigars you have ever

seen. But he also taught a mean Sunday School Class, was the leader of the congregation, and the highest pledger in the church, which made him, in other people's eyes, an absolute saint.

Or perhaps you had another uncle who was more like a real saint, I guess. He didn't smoke, drank nothing stronger than milk, lived to the age of ninety-six, and was a pastor of a small church. Maybe he would qualify for being a saint. But one thing for sure, you know you would much rather hang around with Uncle Elmer.

So, you see, it can take a while to figure out what those biblical stories were trying to say about the saints, the heroes of the faith; they might even be people whom you would like to get to know. It might seem odd to say, but it happens to be true. If you think saints are holy people removed from the grime of life, that we have to deal with every day, then read the Bible. We call Abraham the father of believers, but there was a time when he had so little faith that he passed his beautiful wife off as a sister so that he wouldn't get his throat cut by the king who fancied her. And Sarah, his beautiful wife, was chosen to be the mother of the child of God's promise, but, when she heard about it, all she could do was turn in utter disbelief to loud, mocking laughter. Moses, the lawgiver, started off his career by murdering an Egyptian. David, the poet-king, you may recall arranged the death of an officer so that he could marry the grieving widow. There was Samson—well, you know about Delilah; and Jeremiah, who kept complaining to God that he was too young, or too old, or too tired, or too depressed, or too public, or too isolated to be much of a prophet.

Those are the stories in the Bible that some people say are too boring to read; those are the stories of our great-great-grandparents in the faith, stories about people whom we now remember on All Saints' Day. And the New Testament keeps the picture rolling. You have Paul the persecutor and Mary the plodder and Peter the denier and Martha the controller and doubting Thomas and mad Magdalene and uptight James—you have them all, with all their warts and foibles, with all their alarming deficits and willful stubbornness. They may look holy in those stained-glass windows, but up close they were as soiled as the rest of us. You may not have wanted them as your grandparents, but there they are in the biblical pages as your saints, exposed as can be. We look back to them on this day, but something we tend to forget is that they looked forward to us too.

In fact, none of them is a saint in isolation from us, nor we from them. Nowhere in the Bible is any one person by him, or herself, ever called a saint. Throughout the Scriptures the word *saint* is always used in the plural. In the Old Testament the term *saints* is always used to refer to God's people as a whole, chosen, and called to be God's people, set apart for God's purposes in the world. In the New Testament Paul will speak of the people to whom he writes as "*the saints*" in Jerusalem, the "*saints*" at Corinth, the "*saints*" in Rome, and sends greetings from the "*saints*" who are with him when he writes a particular letter. They are all, he says, "*called to be saints*," never singular saints apart from the rest of the saints as a whole.

But did you notice that in the New Testament these were people still living. Doing the work of God as they were led by the Holy Spirit.

No believer is self-made—and this day celebrates all the saints who have made us the believers we are. And that doesn't just mean those of the distant past. Think of the persons who brought you to the waters of baptism and at the time of your baptism vowed to teach you the faith and tell you stories that have shaped your faith. Think of them today on All Saints' Day and thank God for them.

We mentioned in our prayer time about the death of Myron Dillow. He was the pastor here for 24 years. A native of Dongola, the other end of the Cypress-Dongola blacktop, the Cypress end being the area I grew up. He and his RN wife Marjorie served faithfully for a long time here. But in my conversations with him on the phone on several occasions when we would check in on each other particularly following the decline of Marjorie's health and their decision to move into an assisted living facility and then other times after her

death—in those conversations he would be asking questions about the “saints” here at UBC.

The ordinary folk, who roam the rooms and halls of this place, who are made the extraordinary by the work of the Holy Spirit.

There is something about the faith that connects us together. And it is important because it leads to our survival. It helps form the chain that keeps us safe and keeps the church alive.

This last Wednesday we looked at Chapter five in our study of the book Act entitled *Acts—Catching Up with the Spirit*. This last week we looked at the chapter labeled, “*Saints Around the Edges*.” We were reminded that maybe when we refer to the fifth book in the New Testament as *The Acts of the Apostles* we are incorrect because it is largely a book about Peter and Paul and probably could just as well be called “*Examples of the work of the Holy Spirit*.” In that book we found many stories of people, not listed as apostles, but were the saints of the faith who did all kinds of things—some large, like Barnabas who was stoned to death for his preaching of the faith and a conflict with religious leaders but many who did what many would call smaller things—but what is small in the eyes of God? We found a slave by the name of Rhoda who was an example of a person who believed in the power of prayer and struggled, but was persistent in getting the attention of the people who were praying for Peter’s release from prison who did not believe her when she said he is outside now trying to get in. How often we pray and not expect to be heard.

This morning, I ask us to look at the possibility that the same Holy Spirit who ascended on the day of Pentecost is at work in people like you sitting here this morning as we do what many people consider to be small and little noteworthy things but are the things that are the very life blood of the faith.

I am not a person who has great desires to go into uncharted caves to see what is in them. I already have my suspicions that there are bats and spiders and creepy things in there that enjoy a cool place on a hot summer day. But I am told by those who do enjoy that sort of thing that one of the things they do to insure their safety when exploring uncharted caves is to use a rope that they can hang on to that is tied to the person in front and reaches all the way back to safety. In the same way you and I are connected to each other this morning and those who went before us in this particular church. You can chart a line, by the names of the people, all the way back to the time that God made a person out of a people who had “*no name*.”

In the words of the writer of the book of the Hebrews, we stand surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses—all those, you see, who have already finished their race—and they are there as testimony that just as they believed by faith and ran their race successfully, so you and I, by faith in God and His promises can do the same.

I know that there were saints who went before me that served as an inspiration and they helped me keep the faith. I am sure you can say the same thing.

So, what do we do now?

It is our turn to pick up the baton and run with it. How successful will we run our race? Those who have gone before us were aware that there would be problems. But they assured us that we could run our race with confidence. We may have to stretch to do it, but we can.

You may recall that Paul in his letter to the church at Rome, wrote what has become one of my favorite passages of scripture. Paul wrote: “*I confidently and joyfully look forward to actually becoming all that God has in mind for me to be*.” To become all that God has in mind for us to be requires that we agree to do the stretching exercise that is necessary to see that the job gets done. But I am convinced that what God has in store for us to be is nothing less than his sons and daughters. We are created for greatness; we are created for sainthood.

It is my hope that you will be reminded that you are created to be the sons and the daughters of God and the people to whom God has entrusted the care of the Church. It is my hope that as you think about the

course of the church, that is struggling in many parts of our world, you will be reminded that you were put in this very place at this very time to be the faithful saints. Yes, you, saints. There are Saint Sallies, Saint Joes, Saint Toms, Saint Stephanies, Saint Bill's—all sorts of saints to be used by God to be encouragers of others, and pillars of the faith so that the generations that are to come will say there was a person, a saint of a person, who helped me along the way and helped confirm my faith in God.

You may suggest that sounds a little presumptuous. It may sound that way but it is what the faith teaches us. It teaches us that we are created for a higher purpose than pettiness. It teaches us that we can soar above grudges. It teaches us that relationships can be healed, it teaches us that no matter how badly I may feel about how I have messed up my life; or how much I complain about how others have messed up my life; I can walk away and leave it behind and live in a new day in a new light soaring toward the heavens on the wings of my created purpose. It teaches us that in response to so great a love the least we can do is to live to the fullest extent that we possibly can, in obedience to the will of God for our lives and in that way join the ranks of the saints who encourage others to run the race.

So, we in the churches of the Reformation do celebrate All Saints' Day, and we remember that the word saints is best a plural, and that we, as individuals or as a congregation, are never alone. How hard God works at that, at making his saints into plural so that when we hear the term All Saints' we celebrate all that has gone into making us who we are, from even before our birth to after our dying; through baptism, in fellowship with believers both before and after us, in fellowship with the family of Christ now in our present, never alone, we are what we are—God's own precious work.

In today's gospel, Jesus raises his friend Lazarus from the dead. *"Unbind him and let him go,"* Jesus commands when he reaches Lazarus' tomb. Jesus goes to the place of death, and there brings forth life.

In a way, this story of Lazarus is a parable of what we'd like to happen in church every Sunday. We come into the presence of the dead—people like Isaiah, John, and Lazarus—all who are interred in the dead past. We recall their stories, listening to their lives. And then, miraculously, wonder of wonders, by the action of the Holy Spirit, through the inspiration of Jesus, these long dead figures walk among us, speak to us, point us the way. BUT PLEASE REMEMBER it is not just those who have died but the saints among us today, as scriptures remind us who help with the foundations of our faith.

This might be a good place to stop and go to the pink room to celebrate the 103<sup>rd</sup> birthday of, Marjune Corzine, one of our saints who like Myron Dillow knew something about both ends of the Dongola-Cyress blacktop, even though she is unable to be here today—but be careful on your way down the hallway, you might rub shoulders with another saint on your way.