

## Saints Alive – Part 1

### **Psalm 107:1-9**

Tomorrow night, October 31<sup>st</sup>, is Halloween. The very next day, November 1<sup>st</sup>, is All Saints Day. Everyone knows about Halloween; many have never heard of All Saints Day. And those who have heard about All Saints Day, like those of us in the church, get confused as to the relationship between the two events. So, I am going to tell you everything you ever wanted to know about Halloween and All Saints Day, but were afraid to ask.

First, some history. Over 1,600 years ago the new year began on November 1<sup>st</sup>, not January 1<sup>st</sup>. Thus, New Year's Eve was on October 31<sup>st</sup>. The pagan Celts believed that on New Year's Eve, October 31<sup>st</sup>, all those who had died during the preceding year were judged. The good, they held, would enter new human bodies and the bad would enter the bodies of animals. The day of traveling to their new bodies was on New Year's Day, November 1<sup>st</sup>. On that day, the Celts built bonfires and prayed for their departed ones as they moved to their new bodies.

Enter the Christian missionaries around 1,000 A.D. They took over the events of New Year's Day, November 1<sup>st</sup>, and called it All Saints Day in celebration of the saints of the church who had moved on to heavenly rest with God. But the Celts were resistant and also resilient. They didn't want to lose their traditions, so they simply moved what they used to do – bonfires and prayers – from November 1<sup>st</sup> back one day to October 31<sup>st</sup>. The Celts added fortune telling to their rituals, which then evolved into fantasy stories of witches and goblins and ghosts. The festivities, now on October 31<sup>st</sup>, first were known as Hallowmass, then All Hallow's Eve, then Hallowed Eve, and finally just Halloween. All Saints Day has also continued to this day, always falling on the day after Halloween, on November 1<sup>st</sup>.

As with most things that evolve into fantasy and ghost stories, Halloween grew in popularity, while All Saints Day just kind of faded away. I mean, really, if you give folks a choice between sitting around dancing flames and making up scary stories, or sitting in church recalling the saints, you know what most of them are going to want to do. Many Protestant churches today don't even bother to acknowledge All Saints Day, which is too bad, because it really is an important time of remembrance. And Halloween has evolved into the modern age as a fun time for children to wear costumes and go trick or treating.

When All Saints Day does not fall on a Sunday, like this year, the church celebrates it on the first Sunday thereafter. Thus, All Saints Sunday this year will be next Sunday. The upshot of all this is we are going to take two Sundays, today and next Sunday, to talk about saints. Hence *Saints Alive, Part 1* today, meaning next week you will probably hear *Saints Alive, Part 2*.

I am a history buff. Learning about where and who we came from, who preceded us and their way of life, how society and culture have changed over time – all of that kind of examination fascinates me. Much of it is good history; much of it is sad. Many years ago Susan and I spent an entire day walking in stunned silence the battlefield at Gettysburg, trying to absorb the total horror of what happened there. We were especially overwhelmed at the site of Pickett's charge, which wasn't a charge at all, but a slow death march that took as many lives in one day as we lost in all of Vietnam.

But that history added something to our development as a nation. None of us would be here were it not for those who went before us. I don't mean that in a biological sense, but rather in a historical one. Our great-grandparents coming across the West in covered wagons helped make my life what it is today. Their sweat and toil prepared the way. My parents scrimping and saving so I could have the college education they were never able to realize allowed me to move forward toward who I am today.

The Church is not any different. It wasn't enough for Christ to come. If it were, he would have just walked around preaching and teaching and the entire world would have been converted. Jesus knew better, which is why one of the first things he did was select twelve men who would follow him for three years, absorb as best they could what he was offering, and then be moved by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost to go out and begin building the Church. All of the disciples except one, Judas, stayed the course. All of

the disciples except one, John, died a martyr's death. And except for Judas, they were all saints in every sense of the word.

So, then, who and what is a saint? To begin with, it is important to know what a saint is not, and that is a perfect person. If you study the original disciples, you will quickly come to that conclusion. A saint is someone who confesses Jesus Christ as Lord. A saint is one in whom the Holy Spirit dwells. Saints are very human, but saints are those who allow God to be the controlling agent in their lives.

Since the days of the martyred disciples, including the apostle Paul, there have been hundreds of thousands of others who have nurtured the Church and helped bring it to where it is today. All Saints Day is one of the times when we acknowledge them. Why acknowledge them? Because with regard to the discipleship to which we are called, God has not left us to our own devices. God has given us the gift of saints, those who have been, and are, pioneers and exemplars in the Church in the same manner that our great-grandparents were frontier pioneers and exemplars. They marked the way forward for us. The Church saints are those who loved God more than life and thus they point a straight way for us.

Psalm 107 praises God with great thanksgiving: "O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever. Let the redeemed of the Lord say so." The redeemed are the saints, those who have been led by God and know it. The psalmist is calling on all the saints to join in praise and thanksgiving to God for his repeated deliverance of God's people.

Deliverance from what? From life's difficulties. Throughout the entirety of Psalm 107 the psalmist cites several examples. I have included just one in our reading today. The psalmist speaks of wandering in the wilderness, not knowing in which direction to go. Verses 5-7 record: "Some wandered in the desert wastes, finding no way to a city in which to dwell; hungry and thirsty, their soul fainted within them. Then in their trouble, they cried to the Lord, who delivered them from their distress, and led them by a straight way, till they reached a city in which to dwell."

Have you ever been led by God in a particular direction and out of distress? Susan and I have been. We began our ministry in 1989 at the United Methodist-Presbyterian Church in Rifle. Just two years later our 15-year old son Seth, who is substantially developmentally delayed, suddenly exhibited critical psychological and emotional problems that required him to be institutionalized for treatment. Such treatment was not available on the Western Slope. It all happened just after Annual Conference had ended and all the pastoral appointments had been set for the ensuing year. We were suddenly in a spiritual and emotional wasteland, and we didn't know how we were going to get out. But we prayed and trusted in God's mercy and providence with us.

And then God began leading us out of the wasteland. Early in July 1991 I picked up the telephone and called my district superintendent, explained our family situation, and said I needed to move to the Denver Metro area as quickly as possible. Seth was being admitted to the Denver Children's Home for treatment and we needed to be close to him. Later we learned that on that very same day, the pastor of Phillips United Methodist Church in Lakewood had picked up the telephone and called his district superintendent to inform her that Phillips had just elected to establish a new full-time associate pastor's position. Since it was right after Annual Conference, the Phillips church realized it would be a while before the bishop would be able to fill it, but that the church was ready to receive a new associate pastor at any time. Both phone calls, without knowledge of each other's situations, occurred on the same day. The rest, as they say, is history. Shortly thereafter we were appointed to Phillips. For Susan and I the words of the psalmist in verse seven of Psalm 107 hold special meaning: "He delivered them from their distress, and led them by a straight way, till they reached a city in which to dwell."

Susan and I acknowledge God's presence and movement in our lives in that drama, and we give thanks and praise for it. That makes us saints. Remember what I said: saints aren't perfect people. They are people who claim Christ and allow God to be the controlling factor in their lives. You also are saints in the same way.

And we still have the saints from the past. Every time we enter the church to worship, we are not alone. The Church saints gather with us and stare at us from the back of the sanctuary. Can you feel them there? If you are particularly sensitive you might even smell a strange odor emanating from them – the smell of burnt flesh. As we gather each Sunday we are indebted to those in the Church who went before us – Abraham, Moses, Deborah, Ruth, David, Esther, Mary, Peter and the other apostles, including Paul, Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Wesley, Barth, Tillich, Bonhoeffer, and so many others. Every time we come together to worship we enter into a divine-human conversation which began long before any of us were born and which will continue long after all of us are gone.

That's one reason why it can be so comforting to come to church – to be reminded that we are not in this thing called life alone. Not only do we have God, but we also have the saints, watching us, urging us to not lose the central truths of our faith – that God is the one true God, that Jesus Christ is his only Son, the Messiah, and that the Holy Spirit is God-with-us, an energizing presence in our lives.

The saints from the past have a great deal invested in this church of ours. Most of them gave their lives for it. They watch me, because my proclamations aren't judged by how entertaining they are, or how interesting, or how long, or how short, but rather whether they can endure the scrutiny of the saints. For the faith I am called to proclaim is not totally my own, nor even yours, but it is the faith of the Church, a two thousand year procession which wrote some of its best stuff in blood.

The saints watch each of us. They watch to see if we can take this faith of our Church ancestors into our own being and claim it as our own. They watch to see if we can look back at the past and hold onto those precious elements of it, all the while moving forward into a new age. Those who can are also called saints. It is then that the ancient saints and the modern saints join hands and together are truly Saints Alive!

Next week will be Saints Alive, Part 2. We will speak of our personal saints, past and present, who have influenced our lives. "O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever. Let the redeemed of the Lord say so." And God's people said? – Amen!

- Pastor Richmond B. Stoakes, Carbondale Community United Methodist Church, 30 October 2011