“Saints”

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Hebrews 9:1-15a

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***Hebrews 9:1-1******5a***

***Now the first covenant had regulations for worship and an earthly sanctuary. 2For a tent was constructed, the first one, in which were the lampstand, the table, and the bread of the Presence; this is called the holy place. 3Behind the second curtain was a tent called the holy of holies. 4In it stood the golden altar of incense and the ark of the covenant overlaid on all sides with gold, in which there were a golden urn holding the manna, and Aaron’s rod that budded, and the tablets of the covenant; 5above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat. Of these things we cannot speak now in detail.***

***6These preparations having thus been made, the priests go continually into the first tent to carry out their ritual duties, 7but only the high priest goes into the second, and he but once a year and not without taking the blood that he offers for himself and for the sins committed unintentionally by the people. 8By this the Holy Spirit indicates that the way into the sanctuary has not yet been disclosed as long as the first tent is still standing. 9This is a symbol of the present time, indicating that gifts and sacrifices are offered that cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper 10but deal only with food and drink and various baptisms, regulations for the body imposed until the time comes to set things right.***

***11But when Christ came as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation), 12he entered once for all into the holy place, not with the blood of goats and calves but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption. 13For if the blood of goats and bulls and the sprinkling of the ashes of a heifer sanctifies those who have been defiled so that their flesh is purified, 14how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to worship the living God!***

***15For this reason he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance.***

One of the most surprising and beautiful things about my trip to Sweden this summer was the realization that I had people. I met many of them and loved everyone I met. I also learned about so many more of them through papers and boxes and items passed down from family to family. I have a copy of one document that lists all of the family members through all of the generations that have lived on that land going back to the 1600’s. As the years continue to go by, I will be one name among all the many who represent ancestors in that ever lengthening document.

We all *have* ancestors, and we will all one day *be* ancestors.

“In early Christian tradition, saints’ days began as a way to mark the anniversary of a martyr’s death — his or her “birthday” as a saint. By the middle of the church’s first millennium, there were so many martyrs that it was hard to give them all their due. All Saints’ Day was established as an opportunity to honor *all* the saints, known and unknown.” Last week was Reformation Sunday where we talked a little bit about how the statements of some of the Reformers changed the trajectory of some of the beliefs and traditions within the Christian faith. In our tradition now we don’t label people as Saints officially as holy people set aside. Rather, we focus on “the *ongoing* work of” making holy “the *whole* people of God. Rather than putting saints on pedestals as holy people set apart in glory, we give glory to God for the ordinary, holy lives of the believers in this and every age.”

Here on this table we see now and will see later this morning, representations of the people that you and I ordinary believers love and revere. I imagine that many of them are on our own personal pedestal as we remember them in our hearts. We give glory to God for their holy lives today.

As we continue our travels through the book of Hebrews today, I remind us of the quote that is at the top of your bulletin that comes from the first line of Hebrews. “Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son.” Having been written early on after the death of Christ, our author was referring to ancestors like Abraham, Moses, who had all been spoken to by prophets like Isaiah, Elijah, Amos, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. In our world, we might think of ancestors as *anyone* who came before us, or more specifically *people we are related to* that came before us. An ancestor can be someone we have never met, or someone we know, either way would be an appropriate definition.

When I think of ancestors in this setting of All Saint’s Day, I think of anyone who has gone before us who we want to honor for their connection to us and for the life they lived. They are our own personal saints because of the special place they have in our hearts. Every picture or item on this table represents a deep relationship. It is these deep relationships that we honor today in each of the personal stories that these photos and memorabilia represent. I would love to hear about each person here. These are our saints. May God bless these connections we share.

From the beginning, the author of Hebrews has been trying to encourage new believers to not give up their new habits and traditions. The author of Hebrews is trying to help his listeners into their new life even though they are far away from their homes and their temple worship is non-existent. Even though the person they had come to love, Jesus, has died. The expectation was that Jesus was coming back – in their life time. Disappointment was setting in. Eventually that generation passed, and the next generation passed, and generation after generation. Here are you and I now, how many generations later, still continuing the traditions of those who are waiting for Christ to return.

Using the role of the priest in the temple offering sacrifices that the listeners would have been very familiar with the author compares many things. In today’s reading, the whole step by step description of the temple and the rituals is described.

First, we hear that the first covenant had regulations for what worship should entail and what an earthly sanctuary should look like. A tent was constructed, we are even told what furniture was there, and the name of the bread that was there, and the name of that was holy place. The regulations also called for a second curtain with another name, the holy of holies. The complete description of what was in the holy of holies is even described, picturing the golden altar, incense, the ark of the covenant, lots of gold, the tablets of the covenant, and cherubim of glory. All this detail to describe a scene that you and I would not understand but need to be able to know about in order to know how to understand the next paragraph.

That was how the sanctuary looked. Next the author describes what was prescribed to happen in this sanctuary. Here’s what the priests do. Only the high priest is allowed to bypass the second curtain, and even then, it is only allowed once each year. That priest takes in the offerings from others, and his own offerings. These offerings will only appease sins that deal with food and drink and various rituals, and regulations for the body that have been imposed, probably the Levitical purity laws.

Here is this tiny reference to something else. “the Holy Spirit indicates that the way into the sanctuary has not yet been disclosed as long as the first tent is still standing.” Hmm. This tent that has just been described, will not be standing in the future? How confusing this must have sounded to the listeners to the words from Hebrews. And this other strange statement – the offerings of gifts and sacrifices “cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper.” What does this mean? Will there be another tent? Will there be another kind of sacrifice that is enough to perfect the conscience of the worshiper? What does that even mean?

Next we get some explanation – here is what has happened since Christ came as high priest. Christ doesn’t need that original tent with two curtains. Christ has come through a tent that is greater and more perfect – not made with human hands; not of this creation. Christ did not enter that tent one time each year again and again, Christ entered that tent one time and offered his own blood – not the blood of animals. Christ did one time, for all time, for all circumstances, for our whole being, obtain eternal redemption.

How strange this must have seemed to those that heard these words from Hebrews. Can you imagine even still, what it must have been like to try to understand something that you’ve been a part of your whole life in your culture, in such a strange way. How can these human earthly things be accomplished by Christ who is dead, in a place that is not of this earth? How many of the new faithful must have said, “How can this be?” and perhaps turned away. Especially as they lived day after day and Jesus did not return?

It might be hard for us to imagine what it was like to first hear the stories of our faith and remember how we took in that information. Did it all sound a little crazy? Were you an adult and found it hard to discern things like facts, traditions, metaphors, temporal and geographical dichotomies? Adults like to make sense of things, but a deep faith always lands in deep mystery. Somewhere along the way, we find we are experiencing something we cannot understand and cannot deny.

The radical gospel message teaches us to live in this place where we say to ourselves “How can this be?” at the same time as we say “Thanks be to God!” It’s the saints in our lives, those from long ago who we never met, as well as those in more recent days who held us close who taught us how to live into mysteries that make life so much richer. They taught us that in the end, love is the way the truth and the light. Thanks to the saints in our lives who helped us live into these mysteries. Praise God for the connections that continue to bless our lives.

Amen.