

22nd Sunday after Pentecost

“Bread for the Spiritual Journey”

5 November 2017—Salado UMC

Preaching Text: Joshua 3:7-17

“The longest part of the journey is said to be the passing of the gate”

Marcus Terentius Varro (116 BC - 27 BCE, *On Agriculture*).

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Today we remember our saints who used their faith in daily life. We also explore what it means to be a steward as we use our faith. All Saints Day may be one of the most important Sabbaths that we celebrate as God’s people. Stewardship and what saints (or believers) have done for God’s people fit like a nock to a bow string. Sometimes the day overwhelms our ability to articulate its meaning. Emotion renders our tongues practically inarticulate today. Yet, we offer our beloved back to God in death as we honor their sacred memory.

I once stood beside a six-foot open grave as we celebrated the life of a saint from our little church. People were grief stricken. They genuinely loved this saint. He was kind to all and unfailingly helpful to those he encountered. I, too, was anguished when I intoned the words of a thousand and a half years: “And I heard a voice from heaven saying, ‘Write this: Blessed are the dead who from now on die in the Lord.’ ‘Yes,’ says the Spirit, ‘they will rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them’ ” (Revelation 14:13). Yet, later as I reflected on the day, our friend was a blessed fellow who could legitimately rejoice that “his deeds” followed him—for his deeds were pure, righteous, and full of Christian virtue. We did not need to say much about our departed friend because his life had written a whole new gospel.

Hear part of our day’s lesson for the 22nd Sunday after Pentecost:

⁷ The LORD said to Joshua, “This day I will begin to exalt you in the sight of all Israel, so that they may know that I will be with you as I was with Moses. ⁸ You are the one who shall command the priests who bear the ark of the covenant, ‘When you come to the edge of the waters of the Jordan, you shall stand still in the Jordan.’” ⁹ Joshua then said to the Israelites, “Draw near and hear the words of the LORD your God.” ¹⁰ Joshua said, “By this you shall know that among you is the living God who without fail will drive out from before you the Canaanites, Hittites, Hivites, Perizzites, Girgashites, Amorites, and Jebusites: ¹¹ the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth is going to pass before you into the Jordan. ¹² So now select twelve men from the tribes of Israel, one from each tribe. ¹³ When the soles of the feet of the priests who bear the ark of the LORD, the Lord of all the earth, rest in the waters of the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan flowing from above shall be cut off; they shall stand in a single heap” ¹⁴ When the people set out from their tents to cross over the Jordan, the priests bearing the ark of the covenant were in front of the people. ¹⁵ Now the Jordan overflows all its banks throughout the time of harvest. So when those who bore the ark had come to the Jordan, and the feet of the priests bearing the ark were dipped in the edge of the water, ¹⁶ the waters flowing from above stood still, rising up in a single heap far off at Adam, the city that is beside Zarethan, while those flowing toward the sea of the Arabah, the Dead Sea, were wholly cut off. Then the people crossed over opposite Jericho.

¹⁷ While all Israel were crossing over on dry ground, the priests who bore the ark of the covenant

of the LORD stood on dry ground in the middle of the Jordan, until the entire nation finished crossing over the Jordan (Joshua 3:7-17).

Our Joshua lesson begins with Yahweh telling Joshua that God would be with him as God was with Moses. This is plainly a word of covenant renewal—and a word that no doubt heartened Joshua. The book of Joshua progresses from Moses and his leadership. Joshua 1:1 tells us: “After the death of Moses the servant of the Lord, the Lord spoke to Joshua son of Nun, Moses’ assistant, saying . . .” Thus, from the start Joshua either assumes the mantle of Moses or steps out of Moses’ leadership shadow.

In today’s lesson Yahweh gives Joshua directions concerning how Israel is to cross the Jordan River into the land of promise. Yahweh also provides directions on how the Ark of the Covenant will help Israel not only cross the river, but will defeat the people who currently occupy the land—the Canaanites, Hittites, Hivites, Perizzites, Girgashites, Amorites, and Jebusites.

As the ark crosses the Jordan the priests carry the ark into the water. From the text’s description it appears that Israel passes the ark as it stands in middle of the river. After all have crossed, then the priests move the ark to the far side of the Jordan. This scene appears like a processional which opens a formal worship service—and this may have been Yahweh’s—and the writer’s intent.

The priest’s liturgical ceremony in this lesson was not at an altar, but in a potentially dangerous river. These priests stood with the ark as directed by Yahweh expressly for the sake of their sisters and brothers who passed over. In many ways this passage resembles the forty-year earlier Exodus crossing.

We often get our clearest picture of God when sisters and brothers in the faith endure for us, seeing our welfare as their own highest good. The universal priesthood of all believers not only gives us direct access to God, but provides opportunity for each of us to serve one another. Those who cross the river Jordan in our lesson today model their faith and courage on those who crossed the Red Sea a generation and a half before. We today negotiate our boundaries between fear and faith by recalling the model of those who came before us.

I close with a story from my friend Rob Fuquay (St. Luke’s UMC, Indianapolis, IN):

A story about the wealthy newspaper tycoon William Randolph Hearst tells that he once saw a picture of a beautiful portrait painted by a famous artist. He decided he must have the portrait. He hired a detective to track down the work of art. Several months and several thousand dollars later, the detective reported that he had good news and bad news. The good news was that he had indeed located the portrait. The bad news was that he found it in one of Mr. Hearst’s warehouses. He already owned the painting!

It might not sound like the most spiritual activity to review what you have, but I can assure you it is a spiritual multiplier. Any time we assess the ways God has blessed us (and don’t limit it to material blessings), we will create a ledger that confirms a powerful assurance of God’s blessing that day-to-day realities can obscure. I hope you will try this exercise. Write out what you “owned” January 1 of this year. List all of your accounts, assets, non-tangible gifts, etc. Then write out what those are today. What might you discover about what you already own? I believe you will say, “I am blessed!”

May we ponder this in our hearts as we discover what God has already given us. Our efforts do not make us saints. Rather, we become saints when God confers on us “gifts and graces” to handle as

stewards. When we use God's resources for shaping God's Realm, then God develops us into true saints. God bestows sainthood at the point where God's grace encounters our stewardship. There, we find God and God's saints.

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