

"On the Shoulders of Saints"

"But the holy ones of the Most High shall receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom for ever – for ever and ever."

One of the highlights of the year in my childhood was the Fourth of July parade in Plainfield. It was one of the largest parades in New Jersey, with a wide variety of floats, marching bands, honor guards, veteran's groups, firetrucks, and people passing out candy and small American flags. The only problem with the parade was that it was hard for me to see; there were so many tall people lining the street that a small boy didn't stand a chance getting a glimpse of the passing parade. Thankfully, my father came to my rescue when he would pick me up and put me on his shoulders, so that I could enjoy the seemingly endless array of visual and aural delights passing by as we celebrated our nation's birthday.

Because I grew so quickly and so tall, I was able to watch the parade on my own two feet; and when I joined our high school's marching band, I was soon in our local parades as a member of the saxophone section and eventually as drum major leading the band. But even though I no longer needed to be on my father's shoulders, in many ways I still relied on both my parents to pick me up and help me experience the wonders of the world. It was my parents who gave me a solid foundation so that I might learn about God's good creation; they were the ones who helped me understand about God's love for me and all God's children; they lifted me up so that I might know with certainty that we are not alone, that we live in God's world. As my father's shoulders became the place where I was able to see and hear the passing parade on July 4th, they were the ones who gave me the opportunity to see, hear and learn what I could not have done on my own: all of the wonders that are ours as God's beloved people.

On this All Saints Sunday, we give thanks for all the people whose shoulders we have stood upon – physical or metaphorical. We give thanks for the people who lifted us up so that we might be able to see that *"this is my Father's world,"* that we might hear *"through my listening ears all nature sing and 'round me rings the music of the spheres."* We name specifically our sisters and brothers in Christ who left our presence in this past year, even as we remember *"all the saints who from their labors rest."* As the anniversary of my father's death approaches this week, I give thanks for the broad shoulders upon which I stood as a child, and on which I still stand today, because my father and mother gave me the foundation of faith upon which I have been able to build my own faith life, a foundation that has stood firm no matter how difficult or challenging my life has been.

The saints we remember today are not only those who have churches, hospitals, or schools named after them; we remember all of God's holy people, all who have been declared "saints" not by their own words or deeds but through God's claiming them as God's children in the waters of holy baptism. "The communion of saints" that we confess in the Apostles Creed does include St. Peter, St. Paul, St. Matthew, and St. Mary; it also includes our parents, our spouses, our aunts and uncles, our neighbors, and our children – all who have been *"sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the Cross of Christ forever."* One of my mentors in my pastoral formation insisted that the comma be removed in the Creed between "the holy catholic church" and "the communion of saints," because the church *is* the fellowship of God's holy people, all who are saints because of their having been chosen by God and redeemed through the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

- "I believe that there is a holy group and a congregation made up only of saints. And you too are in this church; the Holy Spirit leads you into it through the preaching of the gospel. Formerly you knew nothing of Christ, but the Christian church proclaimed Christ to you. That is, I believe that there is a holy church which is a congregation in which there are nothing but saints. Through the Christian church, that is,

through its ministry, you were sanctified; for the Holy spirit uses its ministry in order to sanctify you. Otherwise you would never know and hear Christ.” – Martin Luther, *Sermons on the Catechism*.

In today’s first lesson, the prophet Daniel experiences a vision that includes the saints, “*the holy ones of the Most High*” (Daniel 7:18). In this apocalyptic book (similar in many ways to the New Testament book of Revelation), “*Daniel had a dream and visions of his head as he lay in bed*” (7:1). This vision is associated with the time of Belshazzar, the king of Babylon, which was a time of famine and economic setbacks; dreams of deliverance are often associated with adverse political rule. The vision Daniel experiences are of “*the four winds of heaven stirring up the great sea, and four great beasts came up out of the sea, different from one another.*” (7:2-3). Apocalyptic images are not meant to be taken literally; they are symbolic, a form of code that is used in times of oppression and persecution to communicate a word of hope to an oppressed people. The image of “the four winds of heaven” were a part of God’s weapons, or tools, in creation:

- “By the wind the heavens were made fair; his hand pierced the fleeing serpent.” – Job 26:13.
- “You rule the raging of the sea; when its waves rise, you still them. You crushed Rahab like a carcass; you scattered your enemies with your mighty arm. The heavens are yours, the earth also is yours; the world and all that is in it – you have founded them.” – Psalm 89:9-11.

In the ensuing battle, four great beasts rise from the sea. The sea often symbolizes the enemy, chaos, the realm of Leviathan – one of the primeval forces subdued by God at the dawn of creation (“*You crushed the heads of Leviathan; you gave him as food for the creatures of the wilderness.*” – Psalm 74:14). The beasts, which will be interpreted as world powers, are associated with the forces of chaos in the world and are at odds with the powers of heaven. Theologically, the battle is between good and evil. The kingdoms of this world are associated with the powers of the sea, with evil. In the New Testament, it is Satan who is assumed to have control of the kingdoms of the earth, which he offers to Jesus during our Lord’s temptation in the wilderness:

- “Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, ‘All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Away with you, Satan! For it is written, “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.”’” – Matthew 4:8-10.

As Jesus defeats the powers of evil that rule the kingdoms of the earth, “the four great beasts” who make war on God’s people will also be defeated:

- “On that day the LORD with his cruel and great and strong sword will punish Leviathan the fleeing serpent, Leviathan the twisting serpent, and he will kill the dragon that is in the sea.” – Isaiah 27:1.

It should not be surprising to us that when Daniel awakes from this dream, “*my spirit was troubled within me, and the visions of my head terrified me*” (7:15). Without someone to help him understand the images of his vision, the prophet was left uncertain of what he has seen and terrified of what it all might mean. In a manner that is typical in such apocalyptic visions, Daniel “*approached one of the attendants to ask him the truth concerning all this*” (7:16). He seeks out a heavenly mediator because “*Daniel not only needs help to understand the visions, but since the visions trouble him deeply, he requires assurance that the future to which he is moving would be beneficial to him.*” (Steed Davidson). In reply, Daniel is given a simple summary of the entire vision: the “four great beasts” are the “*four kings [that] shall arise out of the earth.*” (7:17). The worldly powers will arise, but God will conquer them all, and God’s kingdom will be everlasting: “*But the holy ones of the Most High shall receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom forever – forever and ever.*” (7:18). Even when the forces opposing them appear to be overwhelming and their own situation hopeless, Daniel’s vision gives the prophet and all God’s people confidence that they will not be destroyed or forsaken; because God is with them always, they will receive the victory and will receive the blessing of God’s kingdom, where they will dwell for all eternity – *forever and ever*.

You may notice that our first lesson skips over several verses in this chapter. These verses include vivid depictions of battles that disturbed Daniel; they also include a reference that will have profound influence on the story of our salvation in the New Testament:

- “In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming in the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations, and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.” – 7:13-14, New International Version.

The title “Son of Man” is one that Jesus will use frequently to refer to himself throughout the Gospels as the one who is the fulfillment of this prophetic vision, the one whose “kingdom will have no end” and who will be given “authority, glory and sovereign power” when he “*ascended to heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.*”

- “Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, ‘Who do people say that the Son of Man is?’” – Matthew 16:13.
- “For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.” – Mark 10:45.
- “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on the throne of his glory.” – Matthew 25:31.

Jesus’ identification as the Son of Man is our assurance that God’s promises made through the prophets are trustworthy and true; for “*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*” (Hebrews 1:1-2). It is the basis for our confident hope that as the holy ones of Daniel’s time endured the fiery ordeals that the enemies of God inflicted upon them that we too will gain the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. It is through the coming of the Son of Man that “*he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead*” (1 Peter 1:3), so that one day we might be gathered together in “*the holy city, the new Jerusalem ... [where God] will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.*” (Revelation 21:2, 4).

But this confidence in God’s presence and the victory that is ours as God’s holy ones does not mean that we will be immune from suffering or given a pass from enduring the trials and temptations that many of the saints of old have suffered. Jesus had warned his followers that there was a cost to discipleship, that “*if any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me*” (Luke 9:23), and goes on to describe what such cross-bearing might entail:

- “But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. This will give you an opportunity to testify. So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all because of my name. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls.” – Luke 21:12-19.

There are many days throughout the church year in which we remember saints from Scripture or the life of the church. For some of these saints, the liturgical color of the day is white, a reminder that they died of natural causes even as they left a lasting legacy by their witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. But for other saints, the color of their day is red, which signifies that their witness was a true *martyria*, that their cross-bearing led to their deaths. Even today, many of Christ’s saints pay the ultimate price in proclaiming the Gospel even when such

proclamation can be fatal. While the Gospel is good news for us, it is decidedly not good news for those who are enemies of Christ, those who would rather live in darkness than seek the light that is the life of all people. Being a faithful saint can often be a very costly enterprise.

- “When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die. It may be a death like that of the first disciples who had to leave home and work to follow him, or it may be a death like Luther’s, who had to leave the monastery and go out into the world. But it is the same death every time – death in Jesus Christ, the death of the old man at his call ... the call of discipleship, the baptism in the name of Jesus Christ means both death and life. The call of Christ, his baptism, sets the Christian in the middle of the daily arena against sin and the devil. Every day he encounters new temptations, and every day he must suffer anew for Jesus’ sake.” – Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*.

On this All Saints Sunday, we give thanks for all of the saints in our lives upon whose shoulders we still stand. They are the people who nurtured us in the Christian faith, who brought us to the waters of baptism so that we might be born anew as children of God. They were the saints who placed the Holy Scriptures in our hands and shared with us the story of God’s love for all God’s people. They were the people who gave us the foundation of faith upon which we have built our lives; and even though they are gone from our sight, they are present with us in the memories we share and in the lives we live that are living legacies to their Christian witness. We are standing on the shoulders of the saints who went through their own ordeals, who endured trials and temptations for the sake of their faith, who sacrificed their own wishes and desires for the sake of those they loved and the one who loves them. As we honor them today, we also commit ourselves to living by their examples as living legacies of what they have instilled in us. As we give thanks for the saints upon whose shoulders we have stood, we also commit ourselves to being saints for others, so that we may provide them a foundation upon which they can see and experience the wonders of God’s steadfast love to bless them as it has blessed us. All Saints is a day to commit ourselves to being saints even as we remember those who have been saints for us.

- “To be a saint is to be human because we were created to be human. To be a saint is to live with courage and self-restraint ... To be a saint is to live not with hands clenched to grasp, to strike, to hold tight to a life that is always slipping away the more tightly we hold it; but it is to live with hands stretched out both to give and to receive with gladness. To be a saint is to work and to weep for the broken and the suffering of the world, but it is also to be strangely light of heart in the knowledge that there is something greater than the world that mends and renews... It is to live a life that is always giving itself away and yet is always full.” – Frederick Buechner, *The Magnificent Defeat*.

My life has been blessed because of the shoulders of the saints that I have stood upon, those who lifted me up so that I could see and experience the wonders of God’s creation and God’s eternal love for me and all people. As we remember the saints upon whose shoulders we have stood, may we take our turn as those saintly shoulders that will give our children and all God’s children that vantage point so that they too may know that they are also holy and beloved of God. On this All Saints Day, may we give thanks for all the saints who from their labors rest – and may we too be those saints through whom others may be blessed. Amen.