

Sermon

November 3, 2019

All Saints' C

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Daniel 7.1-3, 15-18

Psalm 149

Ephesians 1.11-23

Luke 6.20-31

It was probably about thirty years ago in North Carolina that I began, seriously, to make my way through the ordination labyrinth. Ordination, of course, had been on my mind and heart for many years prior to that, but because of job changes that necessitated moves from one diocese to another, changes in bishops, etc., moving into the final stages had had to be postponed. But, I knew that, once I got into graduate school, I would have the time in one place to go through the process. And, so, there were applications to fill out, transcripts to obtain, letters of reference to request, psychological evaluations to endure, etc. And there was the formation of, and meeting with, a discernment committee at the church I was attending.

There's more to the story than this, but, at the time, I understood my call to ordained ministry to be that: a call to to be a priest. That is, I was in graduate school, working on a doctoral degree, with every intention of becoming a professor of early Christian history. I didn't see that professional goal as being in conflict with my call to the priesthood. I had any number of professors in seminary, as well as at Duke, who were both academics AND priests. But I was grilled by my discernment committee over wanting to be ordained, but not seeing my ministry as being borne out in a parish context.

Obviously, we worked through that, with the help of some of the professor/priests I mentioned, as well as some supportive bishops! In the midst of the process, however, I found myself doing campus ministry at Duke. I discovered that I enjoyed it a lot—I could have one foot in pastoral & liturgical ministry, while, at the same time, keeping my other foot in the academic world. And, so, after ordination, I moved from one campus ministry to another campus ministry, and, then to university chaplaincy. And I thought I would retire as a "career" campus minister. As most of you know, however, that was not to be. I left university ministry 1-1/2 years ago, and have been joyously privileged to be at Good Shepherd for the last year-and-a-bit. And I have found fulfillment of my vocation to the priesthood in ways I couldn't have imagined.

I tell this story not just to fill in bits of my biography for you, but to illustrate the changing particularities of one's call, or vocation—even late in life. I saw

similar changes—at earlier stages in life—numerous times during my three decades in campus ministry. I had lots of opportunity to talk with students who, in their second or third year of undergraduate work, realized that they didn't really WANT to go into, say, medicine, but rather felt drawn—Is being “drawn” a “call”?—felt drawn, for example, to French literature. Changing majors was a big deal! It might have meant another year to traditional 4-year degree process, in order to make up the classes they needed for the new major. It may have meant telling their parents, who had proudly told their friends, “My kid's going to be a doctor!”, that that dream wasn't going to be realized. In some cases, sources of outside financial support were jeopardized. But it often also meant coming to grips with the unexpected morphing of one dream to another: “Why didn't I see this possibility before?”

We generally can't know what our future will hold. We can dream. We can prepare. We can be encouraged in one direction or another. But we can't know. The most we can do is try to pursue the dreams we have, to answer, as best we can, the call we believe we're hearing. We don't set out to be wrong. As I observed a few weeks ago, certain theologians in the ancient world didn't wake up one morning and say, “Today, I'm going to be a heretic!” Similarly, I doubt that the early disciples, whether fishermen or tax collectors, expected to have their lives overturned through their encounter with one Jesus of Nazareth. Yet, there was something in what Jesus said, what he did, the hope that he represented, that caused them to set aside their nets or counting tables and to set off on a journey with him to . . . who-knows-where.

I imagine the same could be said for “all the saints” we remember today. Whether it was “the soldier,” “the priest”, or the “shepherdess on the green”, I can't imagine that any of them knew what their future might hold once they decided to follow Jesus. None of them, certainly, imagined being eaten by a “fierce wild beast”. Yet, again, there was something about their encounters with Jesus that instilled in them a faith that demanded that they follow where he might lead. It is that faithfulness that is at the core of our celebration today; it is the core of what we heard in most of our readings this morning.

Daniel, while set in Babylon, was written during Judea's occupation by Alexander the Great's successors, a period when the Temple was profaned, and new laws and restrictions were imposed on the Jews. Daniel's apocalyptic writing was aimed at giving hope to those who were persecuted. And, as we heard this morning, it was the faithful—that is, the “holy ones of the Most High”—who

would gain the real kingdom. Daniel echoes the Psalmist who sang that the faithful would praise God joyfully while their oppressors would suffer the consequences of their brutality. These now, as then, remain as lessons of exhortation, of encouragement: “Be faithful to your calling, regardless of where it might lead”.

Jesus, at the end of our reading today, spoke, too, of faithfulness. It requires a re-orientation of one’s mind, a recognition that the status quo is not the same as the status of being in the kingdom of God. The rules are different for people of faith, regardless of the challenges. Similarly, the letter to the Ephesians, addresses “challenges” associated with living out a Christian life. We hear words of encouragement: “with the eyes of your heart enlightened, [may you] know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints” (1.18). “Enlightened hearts”, most scholars think, refers to baptism, and the change that occurs at that event. So, the author summoned the Ephesian believers to recall the faith that was theirs at their baptism, to reclaim it, and to live into its implications!

That we are baptizing [Ava and Isla] here, [later] this morning, involves us, through the re-affirmation of our baptismal vows in the recognition of similar implications. We recall the promises we made at our baptism or confirmation, or those made on our behalf. We recall our pledge to be faithful witnesses, to gather regularly together, to repent, to serve our neighbors, to strive for justice, to respect everyone’s dignity. In short, we recall our pledge to be faithful to the Lord who summons us to follow him to “who knows where”.

The “who knows where” is part of the adventure of faith. It is part of our discovery of what God wants us to do, to be, at this point in time. I have no doubt that being a campus minister was the right thing to do during those years. I have no doubt that being here, with y’all, is the right thing for me, now. What I learned, what I’ve experienced, the talents I’ve nurtured, the gifts that I’ve received — all of those brought me here; all of those I bring here. I am hoping to be faithful to my call, a call whose notes—however indistinct—I originally heard when I was baptized.

Baptism launches us into a life of discovery, of discovery what might be our vocation (as distinct from career); and discovery of what might be our gifts for ministry. The saints we recall and honor today, through faith, engaged in their own process of discovery of where God was calling them: perhaps priesthood, maybe shepherding, sometimes ruling, for some, witnessing to the last full

measure. Baptized, they, like we, became members of Christ's body, and went where Christ led them. So . . . baptism informs our vocation/ministry, which may lead to sainthood. Or, truly, as the New Testament asserts, baptism DOES end up in sainthood—as all of the faithful are referred to as “saints”.

The connections between baptism, ministry, faithfulness and the body of Christ have been on my mind for the last several weeks, after I ran across an article provocatively titled, “Your Church Does Not Need Volunteers” by Erin Wathen (on the website “Progressive Christian”: <https://tinyurl.com/y3f484ul>). I think you, probably like most readers, reacted to that title as I did: “You’ve got to be kidding me! How are we to get anything done?” But, reading along, I realized that Wathen was making a really valid point, one I’d never really considered. She observed that organizations like zoos or art museums or state parks need volunteers—folks to take tickets or keep school field trips in line. But those organizations are differently constituted than the church; they are are secular organizations which we *visit*.

The church, on the other hand, is not a secular organization for which one volunteers; it is a family; it is the body of Christ . . . of which all of us are members. And, so the church, she asserts, asks that its members all become “ministers” . . . not just the paid staff, whether clergy or music directors. As Wathen points out, “you can not babysit your own kid”; the relationship is very different when it’s your family. Our task is to bring our individual ministries to bear for our common good, recognizing that the particularities of those ministries can change as we grow. And it is our taks, equally, to help every member of that family, of the body of Christ—including those newly baptized—to help them realize and exercise their ministries for the benefit of the whole church family.

We can’t tell Ava and Isla [who will be baptized today] what their futures may hold, or how many twists and turns their lives will take. Their vocations, their individual calls, will be theirs to discern through their engagement with God, and with this, and other, parts of the Body of Christ. We cannot tell them what will come, but we can accompany them on their journeys with words and other expressions of encouragement and support when the road gets bumpy.

The road on which we embark at our baptism is not found on any map. But we don’t travel it alone; we have a capital “G” “guide” accompanying us, as well as a whole host of other saints in support. May we strive to be one too.

Amen.