

Continuing Presence

Deuteronomy 34:1-8; Psalm 16:1-3,7-11; Hebrews 12:1-3
Reverend Dr. Louise Barger
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Today we celebrate All Saints Day; we celebrate the memory of all those who have gone before us. We especially remember those who have been translated into everlasting life during this past year. This morning we read those names that had been given to us and lighted a candle of remembrance for them.

The writer of Hebrews also thought that it was important that we never forget the saints who have been a part of our legacy. Paul lists some of those heroes of the faith who represent hundreds of thousands of others. A few of the names included are Able, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, and Rahab.

Chapter 11 of Hebrews is referred to as the roll call of the faithful. Paul has simply lifted up some names of those throughout the ages who have done significant things, and then he closes the chapter by adding that it is impossible to list all those who faithfully followed God. I encourage you to read that entire chapter during the coming week as we continue to reflect upon the sacred event of the homegoing of our loved ones.

The journey from this life into the next is a mystery but we know some things from Scripture. We have the words of Jesus teaching us that He is in heaven preparing a dwelling place for each of us, and that He will return to bring us to be with Him (John 14). We have the biblical story of the transfiguration when Moses and Elijah, both of whom had gone to glory long ago, came to stand beside Jesus on the mountain and talk with Him (Matthew 17). We have the teachings of Paul that while we are in this body we experience all kinds of infirmities and how he looks forward to the perfect body that he will have when he is with the Lord (2 Corinthians 5). These are just a few of the teachings that have been given to us to assure us that our faith in eternal life is authentic.

Perhaps one of the most interesting accounts about the interaction of those who are now in heaven and those of us who remain here in this life is found in the teaching from Paul that was read this morning. Paul says, "Since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us lay aside every encumbrance, and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us."

The picture that Paul paints for us is of a great race which we are running. It is a relay race. We run for a distance and at some point we complete our part of the race. We hand off the baton to someone else and we go to join those others who have completed their part of the race and now sit in the grandstands, encouraging those continuing the race. Even from the grandstands of heaven they encourage us who continue the journey on this side of heaven. They cheer us on.

How often do we call to memory those whom we have loved and continue to love? How often do we continue to put one foot in front of the other, day after day, because we do it to honor their memory? How often do we complete some task that they have begun because it is what they wished to have completed?

Is it always easy? Of course not! I think that may be the reason that Paul encourages us to lay aside everything that weighs us down, that slows our progress in life's race, that causes us to lose our focus on Christ who has already finished the race and waits with the prize of eternal life. For each of us the process of dealing with loss and beginning to move forward again is different.

It isn't always easy to follow through with what God asks us to do. Being a saint doesn't mean that we will always be perfect. When we talk about saints we aren't talking about perfect people or about doing everything perfectly. Sometimes it is the memory of God's faithfulness in days past and God's faithfulness in the lives of others that makes us successful in our endeavors.

When Paul writes to the Hebrews, and to us, about the saints who have gone before us, he reminds them, and us, to recall what others have endured so that we may have the assurance of God's faithfulness that we now possess. It was the memory of God's faithfulness in all situations that gave them the strength to endure.

As we look back on how God helped our forefathers and foremothers we are also encouraged and strengthened in the faith that is needed to meet today's challenges. When we recall the former days, when we recall the days of those who have gone before us, our hearts are filled with joy of the memories that they left behind. One of the blessings that God has given to humankind is the blessing of memory.

When we remember how those we loved met the challenges of life with faith and with grace; when we remember how they overcame all kinds of obstacles to accomplish their goals; when we remember that every day, they did the best that they could to care for others; when we remember that every day they lived their faith; then we are truly filled with blessed memories.

Just as it was with those saints of old about whom Paul was writing; just as it was with those saints whom we celebrate today, saints who changed our lives, we are the saints of today who one day others will honor. Let us continue to *be* the people whom God has called us to be and let us continue to *do* whatever God needs us to do.

Moses lived to be 120 years old; Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind riding in a chariot of fire. However, we come to the end of our days here on earth, Paul reminds us that when we are absent from the body, we are at home with the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:6-8).

For all who have been a part of our lives and now reside with their Lord we say a prayer of "Thank You." May their memory always be a blessing.
Amen.