

November 2 & 3, 2019 (All Saints' Day) | Sanctuary worship service

TEXT: [Ephesians 1:15–23](#)

TITLE: Inheritance & Gifts

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

I wish you all could have met my parents. Some of you met them; but my father died in 2010 and my mother died 18 months later. Richard and Suzi Bush—funny, loving, hardworking parents. 5'6" and 5'2". No one was ever quite sure where I came from. I mention them because All Saints Day is a time when we remember those whom we love that are no longer with us. We light candles. We tell stories. We remember parents, grandparents, friends no longer here and all the things we received from them.

One author has commented that the loss of a parent is the loss of memory itself.¹ As children we would ask our parents "Tell me about the day I was born. Tell me about when I was little." So much of our earliest years is inevitably lost to amnesia. We relied on our parents to hold onto those memories for us, until the day came when they were gone and took the stories with them. Which is why on All Saints, we take time to remember. We say quietly, "Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord; they rest from their labors and their works shall follow them." Then we tell again some of the stories they gifted to us—the parts of them we see when we look in the mirror; the ways our lives have been shaped by theirs.

I wish all of you had met my parents. They weren't saints. My Dad did get two write-in votes once for Justice of the Peace, if that counts for something. And my Mom served on the local school board, which must be worth something in the grand scheme of things. I remember them on All Saints Day because that's what we do. We push back the veil between the living and dead for a moment and imagine being connected to the generations that have gone before us. Here in church we think about those who made possible this building, this congregation, this continuing witness of faith in Jesus Christ. It's both humbling and inspiring. We're reminded of all we've inherited from our predecessors and how these links in the spiritual chain extend back in time literally for millennia. And we pray that what we're doing today—right now even—will be part of how the gift of God's word continues into the future.

On All Saints Day we think about the people and stories that connect us back to times past and outward to all places on earth. In fact, our faith stories go beyond the limits of earth. In 1969, Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin landed on the moon. Aldrin was a Presbyterian elder, a member of Webster Presbyterian Church in Houston, Texas. When they landed on the moon, Aldrin called Mission Command and said: *I would like to request a few moments of silence. I ask every person listening to pause and contemplate the events of the past few hours and to give thanks in his or her own way.* Then he switched off the radio and Aldrin reached into his personal supplies and pulled out small packages containing bread and wine and a chalice from his home church. He poured the wine in the cup, quietly read a verse of scripture and was the first person to celebrate communion away from earth.

I love the simplicity of that story—the adrenalin and awe mingling in Aldrin’s heart there on the lunar surface, and how he chose to add to the mystery of space the larger mystery of God’s love made known in Jesus Christ. The verse he chose to read wasn’t dramatic or triumphant or bombastic. It was John 15:5—*I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.* A candle lit on All Saints Day connects us with saints and loved ones from the past. A borrowed chalice and a sacrament performed on the moon’s surface sends forth God’s story out into the vastness of space. What an amazing gift it is!

Stories are some of the things parents pass on to children, and stories of faith need to be passed on just the same way. Atheists scoff and insist that all we religious folks have are just stories—tales of miracles, superstitious beliefs and wishful thinking captured in leather-bound bibles. But for all the atheists’ rationalism and snarky rhetoric, precisely what they don’t have is a story. They’ve nothing of substance to pass down to children; they’ve nothing to tell to make sense of hospital beds and nighttime fears and graveside gatherings. Atheists choose false certainty over religious wonder and persistent hope. Sure, it’s true that most of the time we Christians are no saints (in the pious sense of the word). But we’ve got plenty of stories—good stories—to tell one another as we faithfully walk towards life’s horizon.

We’re not sure who wrote the letter to the Ephesians, but we commonly assign it to the apostle Paul since he was a prolific letter-writer. He didn’t seem to know the Ephesians personally; as he put it, *“I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for others; for this reason I give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers.”* But what exactly does Paul pray for? He basically prays that they will remember the story of faith and become part of the story of faith. Now, he uses fancier language than that. In his florid Greek, Paul says, *“May the eyes of your heart be enlightened; may you know the hope to which Christ has called you and the riches of God’s glorious inheritance among the saints, and the immeasurable greatness of God’s great power—this power that raised Christ from the dead and seated him at God’s right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority, putting all things under his feet and making him the head of everything.”*

What is all that except a synopsis of the gospel story? To the people of Ephesus, these verses are basically saying, “Stop relying on the cult of Artemis and the false gods of your marketplaces. Come join in the story of Christ.” To the atheists and agnostics and doubters of all ages, they say, “Don’t trust in human reason alone. This story will enlighten your head and heart as well—giving you a hope that is stronger than any worldly promise and a peace that passes all understanding.”

To us today, they say, “In this world you will know troubles—whether that involves tensions over man-made borders, Washington bickering over partisan politics, or battles against fires and floods and climate change disasters. But be not afraid! Trust in Christ, who died, who was raised, and who has overcome this world.”

This Christian story is given to us as a gift. We couldn't create this story on our own because it's too big for our heads to imagine and too compassionate for our hearts to ever believe feasible. It's a story about a God whose fullness "fills all in all." It's a story that goes back to the dawn of time—that extends to the edges of every earthly horizon and even out to the farthest expanse of space. It is a story for all people, proclaiming good news that pierces the veil that divides the quick and the dead.

Notice that I keep referring to this as a gift, not as an inheritance. That's a big part of the wonder at the heart of the Christian story. In this passage from Ephesians, inheritance refers to something that is eternally God's possession—the legacy and richness of God's mercy, God's justice, God's abundant and glorious grace that spreads out over all time and all places. The gift is that we are invited to be a part of that inheritance—to be the keepers of the story, the hands, feet and voices of the body of Christ, the church right here and out in the world. The amazing gift is that we become saints (with a little "s") and children of God welcomed into God's glorious inheritance which is intended for all people. That's why it's an amazing story.

I wish you'd met my parents. Richard and Suzi Bush. Dad loved raising his children on our Kansas farm. Mom was fearless, never hesitating to speak up or help out if she could. They rest from their labors and their works, their gifts, their story shall ever follow them. May the same be said of us.

AMEN

¹ "Child's Eye View", Sana Krasikov; review of Last Witnesses by Svetlana Alexievich; NY Times Book Review, August 18, 2019.