

All Saints Sunday (B)
November 1, 2009
Texts: Isaiah 25:6-9
Revelation 21:1-6a
John 11:32-44

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At the beginning of September we spent a few days on the Olympic Peninsula. It was a wonderful time to be with family and walk on the beach and go hiking in the rainforest and soak up as much of the last days of summer as we could. We thoroughly enjoyed ourselves. One day we went out to Cape Flattery, the most western point of land in the lower 48 states. It's not a place you'll ever arrive at accidentally. You have to really want to get there. You'll take a long, two-lane highway that sometimes feels like it's not quite fully two lanes. It winds along in the shadow of towering trees and cliffs, overlooking the ocean and hugging the rough, rocky coast. And finally it takes you into the Makah Indian Reservation. It really does feel like it's the end of the world. But when you get there, it is so beautiful.

After parking your car in the parking lot, there's a trail that snakes its way even further westward. The shade of huge cedar and fir trees makes it almost dark on parts of the trail. And there are places where the ground gets so soggy that they've built a wooden walkway to keep you out of the mud. When you finally reach the end of the trail, and the most western point of the 48 United States, there's a wooden platform you'll climb. And the view is stunning. You're high up on a rocky cliff overlooking the ocean. On the day we were there it was cloudy, and the water looked almost black. In the distance we could see Tatoosh Island, with crowds of sea lions lazing on its rocky shore. And beyond that was ocean and clouds for as far as I could see. It was so beautiful, I could have stood at the railing gazing at the sea all day. It was peaceful, and almost hypnotic. The beauty and power of nature made every step of the trip worthwhile.

As people of God, we are on a journey together, part of this path through life we're following. And today—All Saints Day—we remember and give thanks for those who have gone before us as traveling companions and guides, especially those who have reached the end of the journey and have stepped beyond this life into the eternal embrace of God. Later in the worship service we'll be lighting candles in memory of some of those special people who have helped lead the way, who've given us an example to imitate, who've shown us what it looks like to follow the Christian path in life; those who have been saints for us.

When I hear the word, "saint," it's easy to think immediately of the famous ones like St. Francis or Mother Theresa. The word "saint" can call to mind peo-

ple who were much bolder about their faith than I'll ever be, who lived with more courage than I imagine I'll ever have. But that's not how the Bible uses the word "saint." When the Bible speaks of "saints," it doesn't mean only the very best, the most noble, the holiest and most inspiring. It means "set apart for God's purposes." Among the saints who have blessed my life are the youth group sponsor who took time to listen, and the food bank volunteer whose love for God was expressed in kind and gentle ways, and the council member whose generosity with his time and financial giving was remarkable, and parents who demonstrated their commitment to church week in and week out. And many more!

According to the Bible, we are all God's saints. We've been called and claimed by God, set apart for God's purposes. In baptism, our lives were made part of what God began in Jesus—to bring healing and hope to the whole world through a community that is all about forgiveness and compassion. We have been "set apart" for what God is doing in the world. We are God's saints. Sometimes we might look at our lives and find that hard to believe. I know there are times when I can be impatient, ungenerous, and fail to live Jesus' values very well at all. But it's not our character that makes us saints. It's a gift that comes from God's Spirit, who has gathered us to be part of this community and given us this path to share that is defined by Jesus' way of serving and forgiving and loving.

We're all traveling the same journey—this journey of life with God. But the path for each of us is different. Every one of us has gifts and challenges that are unique to us. And for every one of us, walking this path isn't so much like following a well-worn trail, as much as it is creating that path by walking it. With our gifts and our challenges, we use all the creativity we've got to be God's person in the world, to live out Jesus' values of compassion and service and reconciliation in our relationships. Sometimes the path can be difficult. There are things that can wear us down—stress or worry or loneliness. But there are also things that can renew us and give us strength for the journey—setting apart some time for prayer and worship, sharing time for fellowship and conversation about faith with friends, or simple acts of kindness that we receive as expressions of God's love. There are also disciplines that can help us become more mature in faith, help us set aside our own preferences in order to care for others—things like setting apart some time to volunteer in some compassionate work; also setting apart a portion of our money to share for Christ's work. In all of these ways, our lives are being shaped by Jesus' priorities, and we are being set apart to belong to God's loving work for all people. In all these ways we acknowledge that our lives come from God and that we belong to God, every step along the way.

Sometimes I wonder what the end of the journey will be like. Our scripture readings for today invite us to use our imaginations. When we arrive at the end of this journey, it will be like a huge feast, with all the best food and drink. Imagine the best party you've ever been to, where a good time really was had by all. And the best part is that we will be reunited with all those who have gone before us, because God will put an end to death. Death is the reality that casts a shadow over all of life. But in Jesus' resurrection, God has made it clear that death does not have the last word. God's love will have the last and final word. And all of the grief and sorrow and pain that is caused by death—all of that will be set aside. Every tear will be wiped away. There are tears now, because life as we know it now continues to be shaped by death. But at the end of the journey, we will gaze out into the infinite expanse of God's love. Then death will be no more. And mourning and crying and pain will be no more. And there will be joy. There will be joy and wonder. And we will know that every step of the journey was worth it, to arrive at such beauty, at such wonder. Thanks be to God. Amen