

“Entering the Promised Land”

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Joshua 3:7-17

1 Thessalonians 2:9-13

Today is All Saints Day, when we give thanks for the lives of people who have died. Roman Catholics celebrate two separate days. The first day, which they call “All Saints Day,” is to honor the martyrs and spiritual giants of our faith. The next day, “All Souls Day,” is to pray for all the faithful who died, the regular Christians and ordinary people who might not assume they are going to heaven.

But we Protestants celebrate just one day. The Apostle Paul called all Christians “saints,” and we believe that in God’s eyes all people are important. Some people may stand out as better examples than others, but we are part of a community of saints together. And each person has an important part to play. So after the Reformation we merged the two days and honor everyone on one day, especially those who were part of our community of faith.

On All Saints Day we remember those who have gone before us, and think of them as alive in God’s heavenly kingdom. But in the early writings of the Bible, the people didn’t have much sense of an afterlife. They focused on this earthly life.

Tom read this morning from the story of the Israelites crossing the Jordan River into the Promised Land. This Promised Land was not just a dream in their minds. It was a real piece of land on the earth that they believed God had promised to them. But as they entered it, they found that life in the Promised Land was not going to be as smooth and easy as they hoped.

As you may recall, Moses had led the people out of slavery in Egypt through the Red Sea and into the wilderness. And they had been wandering in the wilderness for a whole generation, while God tested and formed them as a people of faith. Before Moses died, he told the people that God had promised to give them the land beyond the Jordan River, every place that the soles of their feet touched after they crossed the river would belong to them. That’s most of the Middle East today.

But first they had to take possession of it. The book of Joshua is the story of gaining the land, and it involved courage, violence and warfare. The Israelites drove out whole tribes of people, invading and killing them. We may find this offensive today, the idea that God should sanction war like this. But this was simply the way things were done in that ancient time, and the people who recorded these stories believed the people were carrying out God’s will. That does NOT mean we should do the same today.

Instead we read these stories as stories of faith. The people were being asked to enter a strange and new land, with unknown dangers. Would they drown crossing the river? Would God be there with them on the other side of the river? The people were

still being formed, still learning who God was and what God wanted of them. And we are still learning today. We human beings are limited by our experiences and perspective in the world. Even with the revelation of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we will never fully understand who God is and what God wants of us until we are released from this world, and from the limits of our bodies and minds.

Now some Christians today still believe that God promised the land in the Middle East to God's people and that Israel should do all it can to defend and keep it. But many people of faith believe otherwise. We believe that God's promises today are for a spiritual reality, that God's kingdom is not tied to a particular piece of land. As Jesus once said, "The Kingdom of God is within you (or in your midst.)" (Lk. 17:21). The reality of God's Kingdom is present and available wherever human beings respond to God's presence with mercy, love, justice and truth. On this earth, our responses are flawed and tainted by our limited vision and tendency to selfishness and sin. Still, we can have a taste of what God's reign is like here on this earth. And we wait for the time when we can fully experience God's kingdom and glory, when our lives on earth are over.

Who here is looking forward to that? You're not? Most of us have mixed feelings about dying. But to fully experience God's kingdom and glory we have to leave this earth behind. And like the Israelites, we can't be sure of what we'll find on the other side.

The story goes that before Joshua took leadership, Moses sent him and eleven other spies into the land of Canaan to scope out the scene (Num. 13). And they came back with a mixed report. They said that yes, the land was indeed flowing with milk and honey. It was full of grapes, pomegranates and figs. But the people who lived there were tall and strong like giants, and their cities were well fortified. And with that news, the people lost their nerve, fearing they would surely all be slaughtered. They would rather return to slavery in Egypt than face such an uncertain future. But Joshua convinced them that God would go with them, and so we have today's story of crossing the river.

What's on the other side for us? We can't send out spies to scope out heaven as Moses scoped out the Promised Land. What if crossing over is painful? What if there's punishment on the other side? What if there's nothing on the other side at all, the end of everything, oblivion? But like the Israelites, we do have the promise of God's presence. Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans (8:38-39) that nothing can separate us from the love of God, not death, not life, not angels, rulers, powers, height, depth, nor anything else in all creation can separate us from God's love in Christ Jesus our Lord. We may not be able to grasp what happens to us after we die. But if God's love is with us, there is no need to be afraid.

This year three of our saints crossed over to the Promised Land. Andri Rakotoselson died suddenly of heart failure just about a year ago. He was only 17. We were all devastated to lose such a young man, who was out-going, playful and fun, loyal and sincere, a genuine friend, loved by young children and older adults alike. Who thinks much about dying at that age? We may think of it as a tragedy, and it certainly was for

Andri's family and friends. But what if he's in a better place now? It's just that he crossed over before us.

Then last winter Pamela Lovell died after a long decline. Pamela was a colorful person. In the last year of her life she was known to break into song during Bible study, and I remember her dancing up a storm at one of our dinner dances. Pamela sat close to the front of the sanctuary and often sang the hymns by memory. Often our eyes would meet during the last hymn, and we'd exchange a knowing look of pure joy. A talented artist, sensitive spirit, searching and joyful faith, at once fragile and strong, Pamela crossed over before us.

And lastly, Harriette Coleman died this summer at age 96. Harriette was ready to go. Her heart was giving out on her. She was tired and she was not afraid. Harriette lived a long and full life, from growing up on a farm with 12 siblings, to moving north and finally settling in Leonia to raise a family and see her grandchildren grow up. She was faithful and steady, strict with her children but always fair, a gracious and dignified model of generosity and faith, even in the midst of the tragic loss of her own daughter and granddaughter. Harriette crossed over before us.

Vicky read from Paul's letter to the Thessalonians this morning, pleading with them to live a life worthy of God, who calls us into his own kingdom and glory. We give thanks for the saints in our lives, who inspire us with their delight in life, their uninhibited humanity, their steady generosity and faith, and who go before us into the Promised Land. May we shine with the light of God as well, that others may catch a glimpse of God's glory. Amen.