

**A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church  
By Chris Fillingham  
“Storied Stones”  
Joshua 4, 1 Peter 2:1-5, 9**

**For All Saints Day and *Generation to Generation* Commitment Day.  
November 1, 2015**

More than any other day in the year, today is family reunion day for the church. Which means we might bump into some folks we hardly remember but know that we should remember because they know us. Like that overly affectionate great aunt of ours or that distant second cousin who we hardly every see.

If your family is the sort that does family reunions, then you know part of the deal is trying to remember again who is who and how they are connected to you... while at the same time hearing those family stories that get told year after year.

... Like the time your dad and his sisters, went down to the old family farm house in Arkansas for Christmas, along with their new fiancées, because that’s what they did every year.

The thing was, with these new fiancée’s in the family, things we’re getting crowded. So, your dad and his sister’s fiancée, (now your uncle Bill) both about 20 years old at the time, had to share the hid-a-bed in the living room. But they were already friends from high school. So they didn’t mind... and even still slept in their unmentionables.

Of course there was no heat in the old farmhouse, and it was December. Which means, when they woke up in the morning, it was so cold they didn’t want to get out of bed. But they knew they needed to. They had get to the bathroom to put on clothes before anyone came down stairs. So, on the count of three: 1, 2, 3... They threw off the covers and popped up, just as my dad’s grandma walks down the stairs... And for the first time, she meets her granddaughter’s fiancée... as he’s standing there, ***wide eyed and red-faced in his whitey-tighties.***

Every family has stories to tell and stories to remember. All Saints Day is the day for the church to pull out the old photo album and tell our stories again.

Which is really important for us to do from time to time. Occasionally we’ll get it in our minds that we’re the first one’s to ask hard questions about this faith of ours, or the first one to struggle to live it out. Sometimes it can feel a little lonely on the road of faith. So, **God knows we’ve got to stop every now and then and remember our stories.**

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That’s why God tells Joshua to pile up 12 huge stones once they cross the Jordan River. It’s to remind them to tell their story the generations are going to need to be reminded along the way.

After all, the people of Israel are getting ready to settle in the land of Canaan, the land that their ancient forefather, Abraham, was promised. But the thing is, most of the people already living there in Canaan don't know and don't care about Abraham, let alone his grandson Joseph, or his great-great-great grandson Moses.

After a generation goes by in the Promised Land, it's going to be awfully easy for the Israelites to forget about all those years in slavery and God's deliverance, and the crossing of the Red Sea. And there's a good chance they'll forget all that they learned through the wilderness about God's guidance and provision. And now they are crossing the Jordan River, headed into the land of milk and honey, which is only going to make it easier to forget.

The spiritual tradition teaches us that the most dangerous times for us spiritually speaking is when things are going our way,  
when we're successful,  
when we're winning,  
when things are going well.  
That's when we have to be most on guard.

Spiritually speaking, there's something dangerous about living in the land flowing with milk and honey. It's going to be awfully easy to forget the One who brought them to this land... and start to believe they got their on their own.

And so God tells Joshua, set up the stones. Tell the story. Tell it again and again so that every generation and all the peoples of the earth will know: **I Am Who I Am.**

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Almost 1500 years later, Jesus turns to his disciples and asks them who they think *he* is. The one named Simon nails it on the head, **"You are the Christ. The Son of the Living God,"** he says. Jesus decides to rename him Peter, **"for on this rock the church will be built."** Peter, of course, means "Rock."

Decades later, Peter writes his letter to the church and tells us that Jesus is the corner stone... He is the One who is our foundation. Which is to say, that Jesus' story is the story that we're to tell again and again... generation after generation.

Because it's Jesus' story that is the story of our salvation...  
the story of the One who delivers us out of Egypt,  
who delivers us from all that enslaves us,  
Jesus is the One who guides us through our own wilderness journeys,  
And he is the One that parts the Waters of the Jordan,  
taking us home, to the land flowing with milk and honey.

He is the stone that our lives rest upon, because in our baptism, we have been put to death with him, and raised to new life in him. **“I have been put to death and no longer live,”** as the scriptures say, **“but Christ lives in me!”**

He’s the foundation of our story.  
The one our lives are built on.... **Don’t forget.**

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But at the same time, Jesus isn’t the only stone at play here. After all, Jesus renamed Simon, “Rock.” It’s meaning wasn’t lost on Peter either. And now he writes to the church, **“You are living stones... You are the ones to tell the story of the One who’s called us out of darkness into his marvelous light”**

This is, of course, why All Saints Day is so important for us. Yes, Jesus is the corner stone, but every generation the church has been made up of more and more stones built upon him. And ever so often we need to take a look at those stones... and ask, **“Hey, what do those stones mean?”**

You might hear the story of someone like Perpetua...who refused to denounce her faith, despite all kinds of pressure to do so. Perpetua was a noble Roman woman and nursing mother, who made the risky and bold decision to be baptized. It was enough to get her thrown into jail. Perpetua’s father begged her to disavow her faith in Christ. He knew, becoming a Christian was punishable by death.

She asked her father, **“Do you see this vase over there in the corner? Could it be called by any other name than what it is?”**

"No," he replied.

**"Well, neither can I be called anything other than what I am, a Christian."**

And so, she was taken into a gladiator arena, where she was asked again. **“Are you a Christian?”**

**“Yes I am,”** she replied.

And so, the wild animals were let loose, and the blood-thirsty crowds cheered as they watched this young mother torn apart.

And of course, there were many like her in the early Church and there are still others like her today. In the second century Tertullin said, **“The blood [of the martyrs] is the seed the Church.”** And certainly their profound faith did plant seeds in those early generations.

There is Saint Maximilian, the first conscientious objector, who was drafted by the Roman army but refused to serve. This was a great embarrassment to his father, a veteran, who also knew that his son’s decision meant death.

At his own beheading Maximilian noticed that his executioner was clothed in rags. So, calling to his father in the crowd, he asked that his own new clothes be taken off and given to his executioner.

Perpetua, Maximilian... their story is told again today because they remind us what conviction looks like. And every time we experience the costly nature of the gospel, we remember that ***the love of God... is a love worth dying for.***

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There are so many stories that could be told at family reunion time. Everybody has their favorites. And so you might hear about **St. Francis** standing barefoot in the snow with birds on his shoulder.

Or you might hear about **Martin Luther** putting a fire in the belly of a church by nailing the 95 Thesis on the front door of his church.

But the more you get to know these saints the more you realize that they were not... ***well, they were not saintly.*** Legend has it that St. Francis rolled around naked in the snow to get rid of his lusty thoughts.

Martin Luther was known to be a cutter in private and an Anti-semitic in public.

St. Augustine was a womanizer and is said to have prayed, **"God grant me chastity and abstinence... just not yet."**

All that to say, saints are not distinguishable by their goodness. What tends to set them apart is ***their extravagant, over the top love of God... which marks the landscapes of their worlds like a stones piled up by the side of the river.***

Despite all their shortcoming's and countless flaws... God uses these imperfect-misshapen stones to transform the world around them. Which is to say, then, ***that saint-making is more God's business than our business.*** Because somehow God's love shines brighter through them than the darkness within them.

In fact, as far as I know, real saints never come close to considering themselves saintly at all. There's a story from the desert fathers where a local governor wanted to visit a famous monk out in the dessert, Abba Moses the Ethiopian. So, he went out into the desert to find him. Along the way, they ran into an old man and asked him, **"Old man, can you tell us where the cell of Abba Moses is?"** The old man said to them, **"What do you want with him? He's a fool and a heretic!"**

So the governor left, and went back to the church and to tell them what he found. **"There was an old man going into Egypt who crossed our path and we asked him where Abba Moses' cell was, and he said to us, 'What do you want with him? He's a fool and a heretic.'"**

When they heard this, the brothers there were scandalized and said, **"What sort of an old man was it who dared to speak like that about the holy father?"**

He said, **"He was an old man wearing a tattered cloak, a big black man."** They said to him, **"That was Abba Moses himself!"**

That's the way it is with saints. They don't see what the rest of us see. And sometimes they have no idea that God is using them, like living-stone, building up a spiritual temple.... showing us the way of Christ.

But generation upon generation, their lives are there, like stones stacked on stones, so that we will see and remember what it means to be part of this family.

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...And to remember the particular branch of the family tree we come from... because it makes a difference if you're the **Smiths from Rochester** or the **Smiths from Savannah**. And as Baptist, we're the Smyth's that come from the Church of England... from the likes of **John Smyth**, that is... a priest in the Church of England that became convinced that

baptism should be done by immersion...

and only for those that confess faith in Christ,  
because no church and no state can make demands  
on anyone's conscience.

He and Thomas Helways began advocating for Religious liberty and freedom of conscience. In fact Helways wrote the king of England telling him that the King has no right to be the judge between God and man. ***It's not the King's job to dictate our religion.*** Thomas Helways was the first great advocate of separation of church and state, and it was his letters to the king that lead him to a death in an English prison.

Their crazy ideas about Christianity... well it looked like a dead end. That's the way things often are for Saints. But John Smyth and Thomas Helways are the ones that kicked off this branch of the family of Christ known as Baptist.

Their stones are stacked up for us reminding us what being Baptist is really about... about soul freedom, about freedom of conscious... about a humble faith that invites others to know the love of Christ without demanding it of them. They are stacked with other Baptist like them... Baptist saints like **Adonirum Judson** and **Annie Armstrong**, like **Martin Luther King Jr. and Dr. Dalberg**. They are all part of our branch of the family tree and on this Family Reunion day it's important we tell their story too.

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But here's the thing about saints.

It would be a mistake to think you have to be famous to be a saint.  
And it would be a mistake to think you have to be dead to be a saint.

Remember, Peter's writing to a little tiny group of believes in one corner of the Roman Empire and he tells them... **"You all,... you are living stones..." You are right now.**

You see, the thing about being a saint, it's first and foremost about belonging to God. Whether you're good at it or not isn't really the point. **The point is you've become one of these living stones in your baptism.** Because in your baptism you've been claimed by God. Now the only question is what are you going to do about it?

Barbra Brown Taylor writes, **"Just remember that you do not have to be famous, or perfect, or dead. You just have to be you—the one-of-a-kind, never-to-be-repeated human being whom God created you to be—to love as you are loved, to throw your arms around the world, [in order] to shine like the sun."**

You are one of the living saints.  
The one of a kind unique stone you are.

I know, I know. You don't feel like a saint most of the time. But apparently that's a good sign. Truth is, you probably shouldn't. But by God's mercy, the light of God is flowing into you.... and can flow through you to the world.

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We're going to come to the table in just a moment. We call this sacred meal communion because it's the place that reminds us that the same blood that rain through these saints, pulses through our veins... the blood of Christ

We call this communion because this meal reminds us not only of our connection with one another, but our communion with the saints throughout history.

I know, being part of that group is a tall order. But they are there, nudging you forward, egging you on... Saints like Julian of Norwich and Teresa of Avela, and Ambrose and Thomas Merton, and Adonirum Judson, and John Peck, and Nan Ball, and Dottie Holcamp, and Nancy McKnight and Bob Harmon and saints only you know.

You are part of them. And they are part of you.  
And by God's grace you are now living stones.

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**So, here's the invitation.** Take the stone you have. Write the initials on it that you want to write... those that have been your living saints, those that you hope to become living saints. On your way to receive communion, stack them with these stones and we're going to incorporate them into our new building.

And when you are asked what these stones mean... tell their story... Tell it again and again, so that every generation and all the peoples of the earth will know the One who is the Great I Am.

Let's pray:

*O God, we give you thanks... for the living stones that have shown us the way.  
for the friends, parents, grandparents,*

*for the Sunday school teacher, mentors and pastors,  
for the saints of history and the saints of scripture whose lives have caught our  
attention and prompted us to say, "Tell me that story!"*

*As we prepare to come to this table, we give you our hands our feet... our very  
messy and imperfect lives. And we ask that you might do something beautiful with them...  
for your kingdom sake... and for the life of the world.*

*We ask this in the name of the One who taught us to pray, saying: Our Father...*