

**What Will Your Story Be?  
Ephesians 1:11-23 & Psalm 32:1-7**

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The Apostle Paul begins the letter to the church of Ephesus by calling out to the saints and faithful in Christ Jesus. Paul almost always calls out to all the saints as he begins his letters. He either praises them like here in Ephesus or at the church in Philippi or bashes their actions like the churches in Galatia or in Rome. Either way Paul was going to let the people know how he felt. Paul was never short of words and never let his thoughts go unheard. The writings of Paul will either drive you theologically bonkers or leave you with a sense of purpose and freshness in Christ. Regardless, it is Paul that tells us and reminds us of the works of the saints and it is on this day that we remember those have gone before us and have entered the gates of heaven.

Wil Willimon, former Dean of the Chapel at Duke University said,  
“A saint is any Christian, anybody whom God has called out to be blessed, baptized, different, distinctive. Saints are those ordinary people who have had their little lives caught, commandeered by Christ in rather extraordinary ways.”

We want to think of saints as being those in the likeness of Mother Teresa, Pope John Paul II, Billy Graham and others. We don't like to think of ourselves as saints. We run the risk of placing ourselves on a pedestal that may come crashing down around us. Some will put us on a pedestal and call us saints. You know some that deserve sainthood. You can look around this community of faith and see those who you view as saints. If you follow Willimon's description, we are all saints if we are blessed, baptized, different, and distinctive. Four characteristics or qualities that I want us to explore this day. Four questions I invite you to ponder as you continue on your Christian journey.

Another lectionary text of the day is from the gospel of Luke chapter 6 that talks about blessings and woes. "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh." And of course we know the beatitudes from the gospel of Matthew from the Sermon on the Mount. Sometimes accepting the theology of these blessings is difficult. Who wants to be poor? Who wants to go hungry? Who wants to mourn? Sure we know the results of these blessings but must we live out a life of true poverty and tragedy to accept the blessings?

Those who we have honored here today lived a life in God and now they reside in the presence of their Lord. I grew up with some of their children and grandchildren in this church. I remember some of these with fondness because I know they had a part to play in my faith development and where I am today because they were part of this community of faith that is so special to me.

I invite you again to look at the verses of the 32<sup>nd</sup> Psalm. It starts with “happy are those...” Happy or blessed are those who live a life in God. Blessed are those who sins are forgiven and whose spirit is free. It goes on to say that God will protect us, guide us, and comfort us. So if we give our lives and hearts to God and profess our sins then are we blessed? Will we be happy? Will we see problem free days?

This has no doubt been a hard year for the family and friends of these dear loved ones that have been mentioned. It may be difficult on this day to talk about how blessed you are when some of your hearts are still broken. Some of you suffer still and may wonder why God took your loved one. Some of you may know of the struggles of a ravaging disease and say how blessed you feel that the pain had ended. Perhaps blessings and suffering are not that far apart. It depends on how you view these two notions. Perhaps that is what Luke or Matthew is trying to tell us. It depends on what is your view of God and how God works in your life.

I was introduced to a book in seminary called *Lament for a Son*. It is a diary of a man who lost his son on a backpacking journey through Europe. He writes in one of his accounts:

“Suffering is for the loving. If I hadn’t loved him, there wouldn’t be this agony. This, said Jesus, is the command of the Holy One: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” In commanding us to love, God invites us to suffer.”

So if God has invited us to suffer then does God invite us to be blessed through our sufferings? In other words, this man was blessed beyond words to have loved a wonderful son. This man was suffering because he loved his son. Could we be blessed in the midst of our suffering? Again, we all suffer differently and we all approach life and death in very different ways. What we can say for certain on this day is that we are blessed to have known these saints and are blessed for the lives that they lived in the kingdom of God.

**And when it is all said and done, when you get to the gates of heaven, will the blessings of your story be known?**

Some of you may remember very clearly the events of your baptism. Some may not. It is not that you want to forget or did not find it a significant day. The waters of the baptism should live in our hearts perhaps more than it should be a memory on our minds. It should live in our hearts each and every day and be a reminder that Jesus Christ is the living water.

No matter if you were baptized this year, last year, 5 years, or 50 years ago the waters still run over you and cleanse you. They still give us life and love and that affects our story.

Let’s look again at some of the verses of the 32<sup>nd</sup> Psalm, “Therefore let all who are faithful offer prayer to you; at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters shall not reach them. You are a hiding place for me; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with glad cries of deliverance.” Here water is used as a crushing metaphor; something to be protected from. It is the rush of mighty waters that we want to avoid, like a tsunami or a forceful hurricane. Water can bring death and destruction. Water is

used here as that type of metaphor because the light had not come into the world at the time of writing, it had been promised, and God surrounded them but the Son had not been delivered.

Now let's look at the Ephesians text, "In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit." The promised had come. The waters were now living water for all who had believed.

We have been talking today about saints and I mentioned earlier that we can all agree that Mother Teresa is indeed a saint in its truest form. There is a new book called, *Mother Teresa: Come be my Light* which chronicles her private writings. They display her reflections on the spiritual struggles she encountered. It is hard to imagine that Mother Teresa had spiritual struggles. Somehow it makes me feel better to know that she even grappled with theological issues, and calling, and her relationship with God.

In this book she writes that the single most important reason for the existence of her congregation was to satiate the thirst of Jesus. While instructing the sisters she writes,

"I thirst," Jesus said on the cross when Jesus was deprived of every consolation, dying in absolute poverty, left alone, despised and broken in body and soul. He spoke of His thirst- not for water- but for love, for sacrifice. "

Jesus' thirst on the cross represented the thirst that we should have in Him. That we can be a parched people, living in parched places, looking for love, wanting love, and willing to be a sacrifice. Jesus Christ is the living water and only through Jesus can we be quenched and feel refreshed.

It is not just in the baptismal waters did we receive the nourishment but the ability to come back and back to the waters to seek redemption and peace. Those waters are always there for us. We may wander in the dry, parched places, the desserts of our lives but the water is always there if we search for it. And then when we find it – we find it in all the glory that Christ can offer us.

**When you get to the gates of heaven, how did the waters of the baptism affect your story?**

Even though my high school diploma was granted by Cartersville High School I am a product of Dekalb County Schools. I vividly remember the mid-1980's when school busing and teacher trading was a hot button issue. As a child I heard comments like "They are going to take the best teachers out of this school, Smoke Rise Elementary or Tucker High and send them to the worst schools in the county and send us the worst teachers." As a child I did not know how valid and true that all was. All I remember is that people were afraid of white students having black teachers or having black students sitting in a majority white classroom. This was only 20+ years ago. I hope and pray we have come a good way since then. We were afraid of people who were different. We were afraid of having different thoughts, perceptions, values, and reactions than our normal set of expectations and values. I admit that as a naïve child I was guilty of these feelings. But as an adult I have grown and see how ridiculous

those ideas were and how absurd it was that education was not about being community – but it was about division and resentment.

I have had thoughts that I am ashamed of. We all have. We are all afraid of something that is different. But I hope that it is those different things that we encounter that will bring about change and redemption.

Jesus was about being with different people wasn't he? He associated with the outcasts, the dregs of society, those different people. Paul writes in this passage from Ephesians, "I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened you may know what is the hope to which he has called you." Paul knew of the ministry of Jesus and his teachings and preachings for the gospel of those who need hope. If Jesus gives us a spirit of wisdom then we can have an enlightened heart. An enlightened heart is what God has called us to have and placed in each of us when we accept Jesus. Paul speaks of the hope that is in Christ Jesus. It is not a hope that we take lightly but a hope that will lead us on this journey in Jesus. If God gives us wisdom and revelation then an enlightened heart will soon follow.

Jesus preached different thoughts and ideas and challenging the mindsets of a law that was stringent and restrictive and introducing the idea of being free. We rejoice today because of this freedom to be different. We rejoice today because we celebrate diversity and inclusion. We rejoice today because when we see the differences we then have the chance to change the world I hope this is what we can do. When was the last time you realized something was different but OK? When was the last time you thought that being different was OK? When was the last time you went outside your comfort zone to do something different?

I have been to Ukraine twice over the last three summers. Ukraine is a country with a battered and troubled past and a country with a beautiful spirit. Our church collaborates with ministry partners to sponsor children's camps in the western part of the country. Going to Ukraine took me out of my comfort zone and called me to be different. I saw that the children of these camps, many orphans, speak a different language, they had a different upbringing, have a different political system, a different socio-economic reality, and a different life. But what we shared together is the gospel of Christ. When I look at the faces of the children of these camps I encounter the face of God and celebrate the diversity and the differences that we have because we are all one in Christ Jesus.

I am proud of this church for the good things that you do to serve others. Whether in Stone Mountain or Lilburn or New York City or Biloxi, Mississippi or in Uganda. God does not call us to stay inside these walls to proclaim His word but then to go outside these walls in these communities to spread the light and love of Jesus Christ.

If you have not had the blessings to serve others in the missions of the church I urge you to do so. Remember what James 2:26 "For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead." It is not enough to sit in this room each Sunday one hour or stay in a room studying your Bible. Don't get me wrong, these things are important but what sustains that and brings even greater pleasure is when you go into the community to be the hands and feet of Christ.

Go outside that comfort zone, explore the differences of the human story, embrace the gospel of Christ, and encounter the face of God in where you go, travel, and serve. Believe me -- you will be different after you have.

**When you get to the gates of heaven, will the differences of your story be celebrated?**

Northern Virginia and Washington, DC are distinctive places to live and work. They are great places to live and work. National politics affects pretty much all aspects of life, including church life. We have our mix of republicans and democrats. We have federal government employees, members of congress, and lobbyists that are part of our congregation. More than likely any conversation at church will come back to a political or social issue. That is what is distinctive about the area in which I live. I doubt any of them has gone to work on a Monday morning and offered an idea because of something I said. I have had the honor of having a congressional aide call me on Monday morning for a copy of my sermon for a member of congress that was in attendance on a Sunday morning. I keep waiting on an invitation to begin a morning session of congress with a prayer but no invites yet!

No matter the places we live or the places we serve in any vocation, life is about the story you will tell. No one can tell your story but you. That is what makes it distinctive. You display your story and live your story by your actions, your footsteps, your words, and your presence. Sometimes we are ashamed by the actions and the words. Sometimes we want to replay the low moments of life. We want a second chance. Many of us get a second chance and many of us unfortunately will squander it.

So what is my distinctive story and am I a saint? Honestly, I don't feel like one. Even as a minister life can be a struggle. I met a minister friend the other day for lunch and she said, "How's life?" soon after our initial greeting and I said, "sometimes it's confusing." Don't get me wrong- I have a beautiful loving supportive wife and beautiful healthy daughters but ministry is never easy. You may think that the work of the Lord is easy and as they say, the benefits are out of this world. A calling into ministry is not a one time event- it is constant conversation and rediscovery of your spiritual passions and gifts. Like your days at work or school, we have good days and bad days.

We have at least one homeless or transient person come into our church office each day asking for food, money, a bus ticket, or a place to stay. Keep in mind this is in one of the wealthiest zip codes in the nation. 8 times out 10 we have turn them away and refer them to the agency in which our church financially supports. It is painful. I stand here preaching about the Good News of Christ and helping others and know that likely tomorrow I will have a needy person in my office and I will not be able to help. I am sure that the staff here deals with the same issues. There is just not enough funds to go around, who do you help and when, and how do you know when you may be taken for a ride. When do you let your guard down and trust that person to do the right thing?

Back to my earlier question, what is my story? Some of you know me very well and my family. You know that by certain standards I have lived a blessed life. My story is not all that different. I was baptized in this church. And perhaps because I am a minister that makes my story distinct. Sure, this all may be true. But is that my story? I don't think my story is complete even more than yours is. I have more to learn, more to

experience, more to achieve, more to understand, and more conversations with God about this story. I know I want to be a good father, husband, servant, minister and friend. I know some of the things I want to tell at the gates. I know some of the things that I hope can be forgotten. I imagine you feel the same way.

At the end of the movie "Saving Private Ryan" a World War II veteran stands in the American cemetery overlooking the beaches of Normandy in France. As he is surrounded by his wife and family he recalls his rescue behind enemy lines at the height of the war. He is at the cemetery to pay his respects to the Army captain that aided in his rescue some 50 years earlier. The man, in a highly emotional state, turned to his wife and says, "Tell me I lived a good life, tell me I am a good man." Sometimes those sentiments are all we want to express. It seems simplistic in that sometimes life can be confusing and complex. All that should matter is we lived a good life.

**When you get to the gates of heaven, will your story be distinctive?**

When we stand at those gates we want to be known for not only our faith but for our good works and intentions. We want our story to be known for not only our love of Christ but for our love of each other. We want our story to be known for the ordinary persons that we are who are captured by Christ, the living water, and then live in extraordinary ways.

May God always bless your journey, your story, on the way to Heaven. May others always see a saint in you. May God continue to bless those that we have honored here today as saints as well as their families and friends.

It is a day of joy because the precious Lord came to take their hand and led them home.

Thanks be to God for our stories and thanks be to God for all the saints. Amen.