Singing Our Song

By

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First Lesson | Psalm 22:4-5

In you our ancestors trusted;
they trusted, and you delivered them.
To you they cried and were saved;
in you they trusted and were not put to shame.

Second Lesson | Hebrews 12:1-2

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

Sermon

Today's All Saints observance is filled with music. The Sanctuary Choir is sharing Eleanor Daley's Requiem that opens and closes with the same words: "Grant them eternal rest, Lord our God, we pray to Thee, grant them everlasting rest." During the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, we will make specific the "them" referenced in the song by naming one by one the 32 individuals connected with BMPC who entered such rest during the past twelve months.

The two hymns we are singing over the course of this morning focus on saints from the past, too. Each broadens the number far beyond 32, though, to include individuals who never worshiped here. "For all the saints who from their labors rest," we began, "who Thee by faith before the world confessed." Soon we will hear "I Sing a Song of the Saints of God, patient and brave and true." The first hymn was completed in 1864, written for an Anglican All Saints' worship service. Our closing one was published in 1929 as a children's hymn seeking to broaden their understanding of those whom we celebrate as saints.

The hymns and Requiem all draw from Scripture, perhaps even our two lessons.

The first emerges from Psalm 22 when a believer of the past said, "In you our ancestors trusted; they trusted, and you delivered them." In his case, recalling unnamed ancestors in the faith was meant not only to celebrate their witness, but to give him courage for troubles he faced. That believer opened the Psalm with a lament: "My God, my God, why

have you forsaken me?" Jesus will quote him from the cross. Immediately after the verses we read, that believer goes on to say "But I am a worm and not human, scorned by others and despised by the people." We aren't given specifics of his agony, but the faithful witness of his ancestors gave him hope.

ur reading from Hebrews follows a section of the New Testament sometimes referred to as The Great Roll Call of Faith. Throughout the eleventh chapter, the author names women and men from the past who demonstrated a deep commitment to God. Abel made an offering. Noah built an ark. Abraham set out into the unknown. Rahab protected the spies. On and on

It's after recounting those ancestors that the author opens the 12th chapter with these words: "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us." It is the example of believers at rest with God that led the author to call those who are alive to keep looking to the example of Jesus as further inspiration for faith.
Both voices from the past celebrated those who had lived before them, drawing from their lives and witness in the hopes of motivating themselves and others to model the same conviction. That's what this All Saints observance is meant to do as well in our words and songs.

A few days ago, I looked over the list of individuals we will soon name aloud and realized my severe disadvantage in having been here less than a year. There are only a few people listed there whom I met. The vast majority are names without any personal memory for me. Thus, with the words of our closing hymn playing in my mind, I sought to learn more.

One online resource for that piece said, "The child-centered language gives the hymn an educational purpose, but the theological challenge is not childish; worshipers are invited to see sainthood as a vocation that includes perseverance, love of Christ, service and public witness." (hymninfo.com) Since I couldn't personally speak to those traits in our 32 saints, I asked some of my BMPC colleagues to fill in the gaps. Here's some of what I learned.

The final hymn speaks of ones who

"toiled and fought and lived and died for the Lord they loved and knew." Our local saints did that for an average of four decades on the rolls of this church, with one having been part of this flock for 81 years, more than half of BMPC's existence. Among them are former church officers and Sunday School teachers, choir members, and youth leaders. They shared their gifts in pastoral searches, casserole blitzes, Worldwide Mission and the Perspectives on Music small group. Included in that group is one who served on a Presbytery committee to ensure minority candidates had the resources they needed, one member who established a scholarship for Philadelphians to attend community colleges, and two who made legacy gifts to strengthen this congregation's ministry. Each of those acts blesses others still.

he closing hymn recalls a doctor, queen, shepherdess, and soldier from the past. The vocations of our saints were equally diverse, including educators and attorneys, a pastor and a dancer, a model and one whose name is on the patent for The Pill. Many held the essential but unpaid role of parent or spouse, mentor or friend, too.

Their lives included the same kind of challenges we all face with health and relationships and vocation, along with countless moments too routine to be remembered. Yet there were some unusual stories from the group.

One taught the children of Muhammad Ali, and another was a cheerleader for the Eagles, back when they were known as the Eaglettes. And there was the member I met as part of the class where everyone was encouraged to tell me something unique. One 85-year-old replied, "The thing you need to know is that I love deeply my husband of 60+ years, but Franklyn Pottorff is my boyfriend."

Those are the saints we celebrate in our words and music this day. Ones who trusted in God and sought to reflect what it means to be a servant of Jesus Christ. Everyday saints whose memory has not been forgotten, but whose impact instead will endure in us.

Which is why we will soon join our voices in the closing words of our final hymn about saints declaring, "And I mean to be one, too."