

Exodus 32:1-14  
These Are Your People  
All Saints Day  
November 1, 2020  
Rev. Kelley L. Becker

**Pastoral Prayer and All Saints Liturgy**

We remember the great ancestors of our faith,  
the prophets and priests, the ministers and teachers,  
the youth leaders and the cookie bakers,  
all the ones who have shown us the ways of God's love.

We remember our grandparents and parents, aunts and uncles,  
the ones who led by example, who reminded us we were loved, every day of their  
long, full lives.

We dwell in the memories of children and grandchildren,  
brothers and sisters, husbands, wives, parents, and dear friends  
whose lives ended way too soon, leaving us feeling like there was more to say and  
more to do.

Today, especially, we celebrate the dear ones to whom we have said good-bye in  
the past year, comforted by the promise that they are safe with God.

Amid a mixed bag of feelings-grief, loneliness, hope, and overwhelming love, we  
remember with joy in our hearts:

**\*Frances Pearson (candle, chime)**

**\*Bill Foster (candle, chime)**

**\*JoAn Fraser (candle, chime)**

**And for all the ones we haven't named, but whose lives have left their marks on  
our hearts. (candle, chime)**

Please pray with me:  
Holy One, of days and nights,  
of sinners and saints,  
of right and left,

and everything between and beyond,  
thank you for your presence  
that abides in every corner of our living.

You lurk quietly in the loneliest places in our hearts,  
keeping watch.  
You grieve with us in our sadness,  
our losses, our failures, and our fears.  
You dwell with us in our celebrations, our accomplishments, our joy,  
and even in the monotony of our ordinary days.  
You delight in us and have relentless love for everyone.

Teach us to live in that love and delight,  
knowing that as we draw near to you, we reflect your spirit,  
of new beginnings, grace, peace, and hope for all of creation.

Walk with us as we show your care and concern for all the ones who are  
recovering from wildfires, experiencing loneliness, feeling afraid, and struggling  
with illness. Remind us this week that our vote is an act of resistance and an act of  
intercession for all who have been left out and left behind. In the days and weeks  
ahead, make us peacemakers in a world that, at times, feels everything but  
peaceful.

Thank you for all the saints in our lives,  
those who are still live among us and those who live in our minds and hearts.

Amen.

### **Sermon**

The celebration of All Saints Day is rooted in the Catholic Church. That tradition says a saint is someone who has led a life of “heroic virtue,” specifically, the four “cardinal” virtues: prudence, temperance, fortitude and justice; as well as the “theological” virtues: faith, hope and charity. A saint displays these qualities in a consistent and exceptional way. In the Protestant tradition, we tend to think of saints more broadly. Saints are people who have significantly impacted our lives who have pointed us in the direction of God and demonstrated the ways of God

to us. Saints can be people who have died, or people still very much alive, part of our present journey or from past seasons.

The saints in my own life are quite a cast of characters, as you might imagine. They are social justice warriors, rabbis and ministers, professors and friends, grandparents, and mentors. Some are part of my life today; others left their mark years ago. While they have each impacted me in different ways, and certainly are virtuous in their own ways, they have at least one thing in common. Each of them, in one way or another, have interceded on my behalf. They have intervened in times of trouble, protected me, guided me, or sacrificed their own comfort, because they believed in and loved me. Saints are really good at reflecting God's love into the world and they seem to have a knack for seeing God in other people.

Rev. Dr. Jim Warren is the senior minister of First Christian Church in Bloomington, IL. He was my boss when I served that church as the associate minister. He is a saint. First, to be tasked with mentoring and supervising me, and not losing his mind, qualifies him as a saint in my book. I recognize that I can be a bit "extra," I will never forget sitting in his office, a few days before my final ordination interview, and confessing (using many, many words) that I was terrified. I was afraid the Committee on Ministry would ask me something I didn't know or they would decide maybe I am too liberal or that suddenly I wouldn't be smart enough, compassionate enough, articulate enough or enough period.

Jim could have spent the rest of the afternoon trying to convince me that I was enough. But, by then he knew me well and he knew the voice in my head was so much louder than his voice. Instead, he said, would you like me to go with you? I said, "Is that a thing?" He said, "It is. You can take one person with you. I will go if you want that." He couldn't say anything in the interview, but he was there, bearing witness to my answers to their questions and sitting with me in the hallway while they decided if I had met all of their expectations and requirements. As was our pattern, I prattled on and on about what I could have said differently, and he listened. I bet he was exhausted. I was cleared for ordination that day and then we went to lunch.

While we worked together, Jim never made me feel less than, never introduced me as "his associate," always he said, "This is my colleague." He never told me what I could or could not say in a sermon, even when I pushed the envelope

beyond his comfort level again and again. Every year, on All Saints Day, I give thanks for him because he taught me how to officiate funerals. He showed me how to honor and celebrate life. And I truly learned from the best. First, I watched him officiate funerals, then we officiated together, last, I officiated on my own.

The very first funeral I did alone was for Paul, a man who was too young to die. He was the grandson of a beloved former minister of First Christian Church. When Paul died, Jim was in the process of getting ready to go to church camp with a bunch of junior high students. I fully expected him to try to find someone to replace him at camp so we could do the funeral together. When I voiced that, he said, I need to go to camp and you need to do this service. The whole time I was preparing the funeral, I thought he might change his mind and decide to stay or come back from camp for the day and do the service. He didn't. He stayed at camp and I did the funeral.

When he returned, he asked me how it went. I, as I do, gave him all the details. I told him I was anxious the day of the service and I even half-expected he would show up at the last minute. He laughed and said, "You didn't need me. And I knew that. It was time for you to know that." There were so many times in our ministry together that he had more confidence in me than I did in myself. I am so grateful he could see what I couldn't. As I look back, I realize he spent a lot of time interceding on my behalf, not so much with other people (although there were those moments), but to myself. He believed I was a good minister way before I did and he argued that case to me all the time. And for that, he is a saint.

In today's story, we will read about how Moses interceded on behalf of the Israelites. But first, you should know, leading up to this part of the story, Moses led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt through the wilderness to Mount Sinai, "the mountain of God." There, God made a covenant of promises and obligations, including the Ten Commandments. The first and most important commands addressed the relationship between God and God's people, specifically prohibiting the worship of other gods and the making of idols. The Israelites agreed three separate times to adhere to these commands. God also gave them detailed instructions for building the tabernacle or tent in which God's presence would dwell as they traveled on to the promised land of Canaan. After receiving these instructions, we would expect the Israelites would begin building the

tabernacle which would be the mobile home of God's magnificent presence among them.

That is not what happened though. Moses was on top of Mt. Sinai for a long time and the people got impatient. In the words of Canadian author, Janette Oke, "Impatience can cause wise people to do foolish things."

This is Exodus 32:1-14:

32 When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron, and said to him, "Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him." <sup>2</sup> Aaron said to them, "Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me." <sup>3</sup> So all the people took off the gold rings from their ears, and brought them to Aaron. <sup>4</sup> He took the gold from them, formed it in a mold, and cast an image of a calf; and they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" <sup>5</sup> When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation and said, "Tomorrow shall be a festival to the Lord." <sup>6</sup> They rose early the next day, and offered burnt offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to revel.

<sup>7</sup> The Lord said to Moses, "Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; <sup>8</sup> they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a calf, and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!'" <sup>9</sup> The Lord said to Moses, "I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. <sup>10</sup> Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation. <sup>11</sup> But Moses implored the Lord his God, and said, "O Lord, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? <sup>12</sup> Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth'? Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. <sup>13</sup> Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, 'I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will

give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.”<sup>14</sup> And the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.

Whew! That was a close call. If it hadn't been for Moses, the Israelites would have been toast. The book of Exodus tells the story of Israel's formation as a people and their covenant with God. Earlier this fall, I mentioned in a sermon about God's promises to Abraham, that throughout the biblical narrative, we see stories of God forming and reforming God's people, of God working with the people, even when they make mistakes. This story is another example of that. It gives us a great opportunity to talk about how sometimes our impatience and selfishness get in the way of us doing the right thing.

It also invites us to reflect on whether we worship God or our own made-up image of who God is. The Aaron and the Israelites made a mistake. On a scale of 1-10, this mistake was a 10. It was serious. It was indefensible really. The people were impatient and afraid, waiting for Moses to come down from the mountain. Aaron, trying to dial back their anxiety, made for them an idol of God, even though they had promised not to make idols of God. The golden calf was not supposed to be another God but was supposed to represent the God of the Israelites. But this idol had nothing to do with who God was and what God was about. I liken it to how offensive it would be to have a Confederate statue as a symbol of the United States. That is certainly not a good representation of who we want to be. You get the idea.

God was livid and said to Moses, “Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation.” Basically, “I am going to do away with them and I will start over with you.” This exchange between God and Moses is what I want us to zero in on today because I think it is particularly relevant as we celebrate All Saints Day. You see, God made Moses a sweet offer, “...I will make you a great nation.” Think about it, Moses had been putting up with these people for a long time. They whined in the wilderness, even saying they would have been better off in Egypt. They were hungry. They were thirsty. Their complaining earned the people, including Moses, 40 years wandering in the wilderness. And now, here they are, on the cusp of the promised land, and they do this? We couldn't blame him for saying, “You know what...deal. Make a great nation of me. I give up.”

But, that isn't what Moses did in the story. Instead he argued the people's case. He, like so many other prophets in the Hebrew Bible, stood between God and the people and defended the indefensible. He made three points to God: First, he said, "These are your people, not my people. You led them out of Egypt. They belong to you." Second, "If you destroy them, what will the neighbors think? That you rescued them only to destroy them?" And last, and I think most importantly, "You promised...way back with Abraham...descendants, land and blessing. Even when human beings don't keep their promises, God, you do."

And because of Moses' intervention on behalf of the people, God changed God's mind. As we celebrate All Saints Day, I wonder, who has interceded on your behalf? Who has seen your worth when others, including yourself didn't? Whose life pointed has pointed you in the right direction, toward the ways of God? Who showed you that there is a place for you in the world, in the church, at the table? Whoever it is, please take a moment today and give thanks for them. On behalf of a grateful congregation, I give thanks for Frances Pearson, Bill Foster, and JoAn Fraser and all the rest who have gone before us. I am grateful for the ways they shaped the culture of this church, making it a place of inclusion, compassion, and love. Well done, good and faithful servants...well done.

In this story, Moses did what good leaders do. They go to bat for the people. They see beyond mistakes and whining and give us glimpses of hope for something better, for ourselves and for the world. They do what is best for the most vulnerable, even when it would be easier and more lucrative to walk away or look away. Good leaders do not diminish the humanity of other people by calling them names, mocking them, or passing legislation that harms them. Good leaders understand that justice, mercy, and love cannot be separated.

**\*SLIDE**

On Tuesday, we will each vote for the people we believe will provide good leadership for this city, state, and nation. My job is not to tell you who to vote for, in fact that is against the law. My job is to, very directly, remind you that your faith, what you believe about God and what you believe about human beings, ought to dictate how you vote.

This story about Moses has reminded me that voting is a way we can intercede on behalf of our neighbors. Our votes could stand between our neighbors and more

suffering. Our votes could show our neighbors their worth. The ballots we cast could be life-giving to our neighbors who don't have access to healthcare, immigrant parents who are separated from their children, members of the LGBTQ+ community who don't feel safe, Black people who have been shown their lives don't matter, and women who have the right to make their own choices regarding their health. Vote like their lives depend on you because they do. Amen.