



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE FEAST OF ALL SAINTS, NOVEMBER 5, 2023
REVELATION 7:9-17; PSAAM 34:1-10,22; 1 JOHN 3:1-3; MATTHEW 5:1-12

A FEAST OF MEMORY



1 John 3:1-13 *[See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.]*

It was thirty-five years ago this fall that I took Neuroanatomy and Neurophysiology in medical school, and first became fascinated with the concept of memory, the brain's

awesome and still quite mysterious way of laying down tracks of neural pathways that enable us to encode, store and retrieve data that gives life its contoured qualities.

Fifteen years later, while in seminary, the concept of memory unfolded to me as a spiritual concept, as the means by which we ritually lay down pathways of religious experience that lend meaning to that contoured life.

The Feast of All Saints', which we celebrate today, is at its core, a feast of memory, a veritable cornucopia of remembering in ways that connect us to something larger than ourselves. Remember your baptism. Remember those whom we love but who now sit at the heavenly banquet. Eat the bread and drink the wine in remembrance that Jesus invited us to the feast in the first place, and remember in a way that you gain a foretaste of the heavenly banquet which awaits us as well. Taste and see that God is good is the psalmist's nudge to use our senses in full regale for this occasion.

So rich is this feast of memory, that the Church has actually set apart a three-day tradition to take in the fullness of memory. It begins with All Hallows Eve, October 31st,

when we remember our fears, those things which trouble our souls and jolt us awake. And while the secular holiday of Halloween has become something more clichéd in its costumes and candy, the vestiges of the tradition are there for us to remember that things which go bump in the proverbial night are real, and our fears help lay down memories that serve a purpose. We are invited to bring them to the surface with intention, and connect them within the scope of the larger narrative in which God is at work.

Which brings us to November 1st, and the actual Feast of All Saints, a time of remembering those figures who have changed the course of history by their witness and will to channel God's love in a world which so desperately needs it. In truth, it always has, and so we remember those whose gift is one of solace and inspiration. In some cultures, folks dress up as their favorite saint as a way of remembering. Which saint would

draw you to consider clothing yourself in their likeness, and lightness of being?

And then All Souls' Day is observed on November 2nd, an opportunity to remember those who have been part of our lives, whom we love but see no longer, but whose presence in our lives surely shapes who we are today. And we commend them to God as well.

All three days are rolled into this first Sunday in November, which we claim as the Feast of All Saints, and we remember.

You know, the neurology of memory is quite fascinating: simply put, we take sensory input—the sights and smells, tastes and sounds, and touch—and wrap it in spatial reference to the location in which the sensation is received, and it is converted to an electrical signal that travels to the brain.¹

The practice of attention is what converts it to short term memory. Did you see the fall colors as you walked through the park

yesterday? Did you delight in the taste of the dessert you had last night at dinner? Did you smell the incense as it wafted by this morning?

That awareness enables us to conjure the memory in short order. Without it, it is wispy and ethereal at best.

But here is perhaps the most striking aspect of memory. To create a long-term memory requires a change to our DNA. Specifically, DNA methylation changes the genes which lay down the tracks of long term memory. Carbon and hydrogen atoms are linked as a unit and attach to the gene structure to change it. Without that change, short term memories are not converted to long term memories, nor is there any capacity to retrieve the memory after a brief period of time.

This genetic change is at the heart of recent newsworthy articles on epigenetics, blood memory, and adaptive memory. Indigenous

¹ Clearly, this is a tremendous simplification of the neuroscience of memory, but hopefully conveys the general ideas in ways which can be interpreted in light of the liturgy.

peoples have long understood that the effects of memories are passed down across generations. Religions have, at some level, know this to be true as well, which is why so much of our Christian liturgical tradition is about the work of remembering in ways that change us, and change our spiritual trajectories. The theological word for this is “anamnesis,” literally the opposite of amnesia. Anamnesis. It is the sacred work of imbedding our memories in God’s narrative that gathers us up into something grand and good and meaningful.

We encourage godparents of infants to tell the story of their godchild’s baptism to them, again and again, over time, so that the child comes to “know” and “remember” their baptism. It is why we say “remember your baptism” as the holy water lights on your face during the asperges. It is why we say the names of those who have died in the past year, and why we invite you to say the names of those souls who have marked your life for good. It is why we share a meal of memory,

so that we are changed, nourished to be saints in our own right.

We remember, which is to say, we remember, we reconstitute the memories of loved ones that connect us across time and space, and we trust in God’s grand design that this Feast of All Saints draws us close to that cloud of witnesses, and the bonds of love we share. They are the very bonds that hold our DNA together.

So we remember today. And we celebrate because God is good. Taste and see and smell and hear and feel that it is so.

Blessings on this Feast of All Saints.