

Listening to Abel
Communing with the Saints

Today’s sermon has heartbreak...at its beginning. I’ll tell you more shortly...
....I’m not sure how you feel.....when someone you love...dies. Today, Good News! Life...overcomes death! Let us prepare our hearts to meet the everlasting Spirit...
.....

Scripture Reading – Listen, Beloved: for God is about to impart a mystery....I tell you. This is Paul....telling the Hebrews, the ones who *should have known*....that God never abandons us. He here reveals how the Spirit whispers to us....even....in death. This is my own translation of chapter 11, the first four verses of the Contemporary English Version.

11 Faith makes us sure of what we hope for and gives us proof of what we cannot see. 2 It was their faith that made our ancestors pleasing to God.

3 Because of our faith, we know that the world was made at God’s command. We also know that what can be seen was made out of what cannot be seen.

4 Because Abel had faith, he offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did. God was pleased with him and his gift, and even though Abel is now dead, through faith, he is still....speaking.

And again, our text, *“Through faith....Abel....is still speaking.”*

Amen.

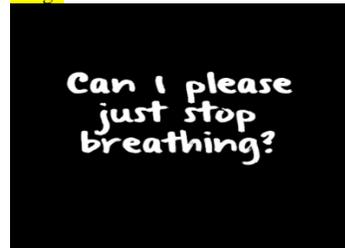
(begin upbeat/confident)

In June of 1987 I was taking a six week break...between seminary and my first church, Third Presbyterian, Washington, PA. I was enjoying that time with my parents, living in Albuquerque. ..Soaking up some...rare...free time... It was my first breather in three years....before I hit ministry full speed ahead.

And then, about two weeks before I was to begin my drive eastI came home one evening from a night out with friends....to find a note in my mom’s inimitable writing on the kitchen counter at “The Moon House”, a little investment home I had bought during my time in Real Estate. My parents were living there then and I had joined them in the interim.

Mom’s note read, "Call Michael Schultz (not his real name), 25 year old twin died, self-inflicted gunshot wound."

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I was....stunned. It must have been about 1 a.m. - and I didn't want to call the Schultz household at 3 a.m. their time...even though I was sure they were probably wide awake in shock....and grief.

I did call...early the next morning. The first thing *"Michael" said was, "Jeff, I tried to tell you when the Search Committee was setting your start date....that our youth....need help. I was hoping so much....you could get here sooner...because I knew my son was struggling." (The essence of the story is: drinking with friend/Russian roulette/his wife, who learned the next day she was pregnant with their first child, was the one who found him.../Michael's wife Sarah...I'll call her...was devastated. The whole family was ...but I knew immediately upon landing in Washington....that I had some heavy, heavy....pastoral lifting to do.

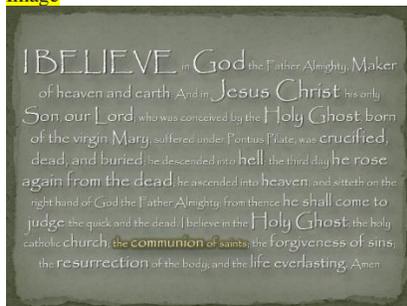
The Apostle's Creed states, "I believe in God, Father Almighty (1)

And Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord (2)

I believe in the Holy Ghost (3)

The Holy - *Universal* Church (that is what Catholic means) (4) and...AND..

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(5) the Communion....of saints.

What is that? What do we believe....about *communing*....with saints?

We observe Halloween, a word evolving from All Hallowed's Eve. (Halloween does have...a kind of 'Biblical heritage.") But.. the pagan practice of ghosts, and American secular development of witches and goblins....is far distant from the actual Saints whom we honor the first day of November.

And we do....honor the saints.

The lore of scripture is rich in describing the appearance of angels (whom we love hearing about, especially around Christmas). There are powers and principalities,and saints....who inhabit earth and heavens...to the seventh heaven.

But today, when we speak of the Communion of Saints, we are not talking about....not technically talking about angels. As a matter of fact, according to scripture...angels are created lower...than humans, having never been subject to temptation...as we are.

What we mean in this doctrine...of Communion of the saints. What we believe about having fellowship with them even now, after their death, or more precisely who we are talking about, is that 'glorious company of those who have fallen asleep in the Lord' (to quote Matthew), a euphemism....for dying. Death. The saints you see....are those who have died in Christ Jesus. That makes you and I... the living saints. It's that simple.

Screens go dark

A funeral is an interesting animal. It brings out all the extremes in people...and in believers. We are, each of us (in a funeral home at a viewing), more intimately in touch with our own mortality...than we usually are. And we're also coping with feelings of loss, saying goodbye to the saint whom we honor (by being there..with the body...or the spirit in a memorial...as the case may be).

I remember a funeral in Las Vegas, New Mexico where a rancher friend of our family, a well known cattleman in the agriculture industry of that great Land of Enchantment had died, unexpectedly, of a heart attack. My Godfather had happened to be sitting next to him at a lunch table...at a Stock Show in the state of Nebraska when he died. So I was able to hear all the background talk...all the talk associated with Ed's death. And ...it was my first funeral. I was twelve years old, young enough to be at least a little wary of the approaching proceedings.

But it turned out I needn't have been. For the minister in that little church started with **celebration**, a rejoicing and clear statement.. of Ed's life. And he stayed with that joy....throughout the whole service!

But it was when he talked of what Ed had wanted, had asked in life for us to do, it was when he talked of this assurance...of things hoped for....that I began to appreciate what was happening in that Methodist sanctuary. For everywhere around me faces were slowly breaking out into grins. Irrepressible smiles began to crease the visages of even the oldest, grizzled cowboys, whiskered faces with crevices of smiles...in their leathered looks. And at the reception afterwards...there was actually a liveliness, a fullness of joy....that I was surprised (very gladly surprised) to see. I enjoyed myself...at my first funeral. Almost every story told, almost every knee slap....came about as a memory of Ed's life with us....what a joy he had been. And obviously still was! (And is... I pointed out his ranch house to a friend at Christmas..as we drove past!)

T Time in: Cut again to 1987. I'd been at Third Church, Washington, PA.....maybe almost a year. ...still trying to fathom how to better help this family cope with their anguish and heartbreaking lost. Then one day in my Bible Reading, just reading through from Genesis to Revelation, I happened across a sentence that my brain....didn't quite grasp. I was beyond it, reading the next verses....when I stopped and thought, "Wait. What was that?" And I went back....and read it. Today's text.

What's this about Abel? And why...Abel?

It took me moments....to unpack the meaning. But I finally figured it out. Abel....you see....was the first human to die, according to our Genesis. And if Abel...is still speaking....then, through faith, so too are all those who have 'died in Christ'...still speaking. And that means ... That means that through faith...*we can still hear them!* Right?

I practically rushed to the Schultz home....to share this insight with Sarah. And it seemed to help a little. She still to this day....visits (Karl's) grave....every day. And talks with him.

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One of the facts of which I have come to be sure in my own life...and ministry, is the power...the very real strength...of the saints with us. ‘We’ve grown accustomed to their face. They almost make our day begin!’ And like the widow in Wahoo who says, ‘I keep expecting to hear him step in the door’...or the widower in Lincoln who says, ‘I see her face everywhere I turn’....we too....’commune’ with the saints.

Screens go dark

Our scripture today stands on the foundation of that word....”faith”. It is faith which is the assurance of *things hoped for*, the essence of *things not seen*. The reality of that which we know...coming to be out - of that which we do not know. If we want to define faith, one way to do it might be to think of its opposite.... as the word “doubt”. < Doubt...and > faith...are at the two opposite ends of a continuum, poles apart.

^ And what we are told today, and every day, is that Abel...is among us. That the first person who died....still speaks with us....today.

The brother...the child of God whose faith led him to give gifts...acceptable in God’s sight’. His faith was sufficient that he was ‘loved of God’. That’s ...the Biblical quote.

And ever since that first death....with all of death’s senselessness....and tragedy...and pain....life...has become even more precious to us here....for now.

And Abel speaks to us....alive now. Forevermore. ...Let’s listen:

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....’I am well”, he says. “And so is life. Life has overcome everything...once and for all. Listen!Hear me now.”

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No wonder we call this....Communion..with the saints! No wonder we call November 1st....All Saints Day. ...Their voices are all around us...still speaking. And if we listen- faithfully, ...we hear....Albert Schweitzer...talking with Dr. Livingston, I presume. And Joan of Arc...and Martin Luther. And Marilyn Smith, Bettina Baker, and Lorraine Een. And my friend Johnny Burns, and your grand mother ...

They're all here. All of them!

This table is full!! They have come from north and south...far and near...to sit at table with our Lord...and us!

And there is so much laughter and rejoicing at this feast, this ...Heavenly banquet!

And Abel is there. He was first to arrive. And...hear him? "Pass the bread." He says. And our Lord replies, 'Here too is the wine. Remember me. Remember us all!'

Amen.

Benediction –

For my dad, a couple months after mom's death/"Jeff, I know I'm not crazy but I just talk to momma like she was here." And I've no doubt that, for my dad, mom is there, and walks with him and talks with him....etc//// 'neither death nor life nor things present nor things to come....nor anything else in all creation.....can separate us from God'