

**A sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Jason Cashing, Clarence Presbyterian Church
on November 5, 2023.**

SUSTAINED

<Joshua 3:7-17; Psalm 43:1-5; Matthew 23:1-12>

Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Holy One, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.

I can still see my grandma in my mind's eye, sitting in a pew toward the front and near the outside aisle. Her hands cradle the Christmas Eve candle that is yet to be lit. She watches me, in turn, as I read Scripture and prayer during the service, and while her face has the intent expression of a life-long Presbyterian, her eyes reflect both her intelligence and winsome silliness. And while I have many memories of my grandmother, it is this memory, this image of her which has become the predominant one over the last twenty years since her death. It is this image of her which so often sustains me when I think back on her presence in my life.

Earlier this week we celebrated Halloween, much to the delight of our children. With all the festivity - and the energy hangover that follows - we often overlook and slide right past All Saint's Day. Following on the immediate heels of Halloween, or All Hallow's Eve, All Saint's Day calls us into a dynamic act of remembrance and celebration of those who have come before us, even as we simultaneously turn our gaze forward as we continue to look ahead. Such a day embodies the words of Linda Hogan, when she wrote, "Suddenly all my ancestors are behind me. 'Be still,' they say. 'Watch and listen. You are the result of the love of thousands.'"

Likewise, Rabbi Alex Lazarus-Klein recently said at Congregation Shir Shalom that we are the doors of history and ancestry. 'We are arrived here,' he said, "because of our ancestors who held the door, and it is our responsibility to likewise hold the door for those who come after us. It is never about us; it is about participating in and expanding upon the heritage and legacy that we pass on."

And today, gathered here in the spirit of remembrance, this is important for us to not only remember, but also to embody. As we stand in the nexus of what has come and what will be, we become the doorway which connects both past and future. In so doing, even as we dream of and look to what is to come, we do well to remember what has come before us, who has come before us, paving the way, and thus to be sustained in all that we face.

This is precisely what is happening in our reading this morning from Joshua. Last week we finished the Moses storyline, but it was not the finishing of the storyline of the People of God. They were to continue into the Promised Land, and first they were to cross the Jordan River. Joshua, too, is now leading them. The "new thing" which they have dreamed of for more than a generation is about to be realized; the physical crossing of the river is not just a journey of location but is also a spiritual and metaphorical transition of who they are to become, from who they have been.

And in the nexus of this moment at the River Jordan, they both look to the future and take strength from the memory of the past. Simultaneously. As they commit to the future, they find themselves thus sustained by their history.

It is not surprising or shocking that, as they cross, God instructs Joshua to have the bearers of the Ark of the Covenant stand in the riverbed and wait. As they do so, God stops the waters of the Jordan upstream from the Ark and the priests, which allows the people to cross over on dry ground.

And if that sounds familiar, it should. There is almost no way that the priests and the people would be able to experience this without the institutional memory of how their parents and grandparents likewise crossed over the Red Sea on dry ground, journeying into the promise of the new thing being done in the Spirit of God. For them, now, to have such a similar experience at the Jordan, is a connection to their history and the on-going reminder of what God has done with and for the people. Just as God sustained the people as they left Egypt, just as God sustained them in their journey into their renewed identity as God's people, just as God sustained them by seeing them safely through and providing sustenance in the wilderness, so too will God sustain the people now, and into the future.

So, too, will God sustain the people, of every time and generation. As we remember those who have come before us, we are sustained in the memory of God's presence in their lives, guiding them and equipping them to love in the name of Christ.

November is a month in which I can't help but think of my grandma. From the time of All Saint's Day through to Thanksgiving when I bake an apple pie following her recipe. Not to say that the apple pies our youth made for us won't be delicious, but making a pie in my grandma's recipe is about more than just the pie alone. Doing so connects me with her, sustains me in that time for what is to come, and allows me to carry her memory and her gifts forward into my life, and the lives of my family.

What does that look like today in our congregation? What practices, what memories do we carry with us of those whom we remember, particularly on this celebration. These practices will be the way we live out the on-going reality that we have been sustained in the past, as well as the promise that we will be sustained going forward. It is in this perspective that Jesus focuses the attention on what the Pharisees say versus what they do; their teachings proclaim the memory of their heritage and the awareness of God's presence, even if their actions don't.

How will we continue to live out the heritage of the faithful who have gone before us? It is good and right for us to name them in remembrance, particularly on this day, but we will also carry them with us into the future. We will be sustained by them in times of challenge and growth. Let us, then, carry forward their love and joy, their commitment to God and their faithfulness as fellow disciples. Let us walk through the doors that have been opened for us, and let us continue to open doors for those who will follow. Amen.