

When the Saints Go Marching In

A Sermon by Rich Holmes on Ephesians 1: 15-23

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When I was about thirteen, I can remember my father taking my brother King and me on trip to Charleston, SC. There we saw a lot of old homes, ate in some fine restaurants and we finally saw the harbor. To this day at the Charleston harbor, you can find iron cannons aimed across the waters at Fort Sumter, standing just as they stood when they fired the first shots of the civil war in April of 1861. I can remember sitting atop the cannons, feeling their cold iron in my bare hands and looking out over the harbor to the fort and estimating the distance it would take for the cannon balls and shells to cross the water and penetrate the brick walls of the fort. And I remember there at the age of thirteen, I could almost feel my eardrums break from the percussion I imagined the cannons made as this attack was launched.

Now, I don't know why I actually remember this. Maybe it is a silly thing to remember. But you see at that age, I know that I also played a lot of video games, I went to a lot of amusement parks and theme parks, and I went to plenty of football games, but these things don't stick out in my mind nearly as much as this trip back in history. I could not tell you how many times I went on a certain roller coaster at an amusement park, or what the score was at a particular football game in which I sat in the stands. But I can remember this trip where I was able to touch history with my bare hands.

And if the truth be told, I don't know that you would have called this a fun experience for me at the age of 13. I probably had a lot more fun cheering at football games, or riding roller coasters, and eating cotton candy at amusement parks. But while it was not necessarily fun,

something about it was meaningful, and having it be a meaningful experience, I would suggest it what makes it stick out in my memory.

Now, I don't want to suggest to you that I was all that advanced when I was thirteen. Believe me, I wasn't. Nor was I necessarily all that interested in history. Like most kids my age, I was much more interested in what was happening at that time, happening in the now of when I was thirteen. I was interested in movie and television stars that were popular at that time, I was interested in music that was popular at that time. I was interested in fads and fashions that were popular at that time. Like most kids my age, anything that happened before my lifetime was boring, and stories about events from such times couldn't hold my interest for more than five minutes. Now, I say I was like most kids my age, but not all kids. There were some kids around who even at thirteen had a real interest, even an obsession with other times and other ages, like Edwin Arlington Robinson's Miniver Cheevy. Miniver cursed the commonplace and eyed a khaki suit with loathing, he missed the medieval grace of iron clothing. Miniver loved the days of old when swords were bright and steeds were prancing, the vision of a warrior bold would set him dancing. There were kids like that when I was thirteen, but they were usually the social outcasts. They were usually rejected by their peers for that very reason. The rest of us weren't like Miniver Cheevy. We were as obsessed with the present, as Miniver was with the past.

But what happened to me when I was thirteen I suppose is that a seed was planted, a seed that would later grow and flower into an eventual interest in things that really did happen before my time, like those seeds eventually grow and flower for most of us. Most of us eventually realize there is more to life than now, there is more to life than the present. And

whatever it is that holds our interest for more than five minutes in life does so because there is a long line of people before us who laid the foundations of what we now enjoy. You cannot enjoy music without realizing that the music you enjoy probably has its roots in jazz and blues, which in turn have their roots in European harmonies and African rhythms. You cannot enjoy a sit-com on television without realizing the same comedic situation you're viewing has just been thawed out and reheated from some act on vaudeville that your grandparents watched. And you can't even go to the polls and cast your votes this Tuesday without thinking about what we owe to a lot of funny looking men in powdered wigs.

And I would bet that something else happens to you whenever you realize that we owe a lot to those generations of people who came before us, and that is that you owe something to those who will come after you. You realize that just as life did not begin for everyone the moment you were born, life also will not end for the rest of us at the moment you take your final breath. You realize that it matters that you do not waste and pollute as much as possible and that you do your best not to leave a dying planet for your grandchildren and great-grandchildren. That didn't matter to me when I was thirteen. And when you have children you realize that things like their education matters because long after you are gone, their lives will go on.

When you are young, when you are a child, you tend to think that all that matters is the time you are living in, the time you can see and touch and that is present to your five senses. But when we grow up a little we realize there is more to life than what can see and touch and taste and smell and hear. We realize that there was a time before us and there will be a time after us.

We celebrated All Saints Day on Friday because It is the same way for us in the church. In the church, we also believe that there is such a thing as growing up. Paul says when I was a child I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child, but when I became a man, I put away childish things. And part of growing up as a person of faith is coming to realize our faith in Christ did not just fall from the sky one day. We stand on the shoulders of generation after generation of people who made it possible for us to believe. Often and in fact most of the time they came to bring us their Christian faith through tremendous hardship, hardships we know nothing about in this age. Some of them were persecuted for their faith. Some of them fought wars to defend their faith. Some of them translated the bible from ancient Greek and Hebrew using a quill and ink and doing it by candlelight. Some of them wrote out sermons by hand and by candlelight. And if you think it is tough these days getting little children ready for church in the morning. And it is tough, I remember. Think for a moment of what it must have been like in the 19th century. In the 18th century. In the 17th century.

If you know the names of Mitt Romney, George W. Bush, and Franklin Roosevelt, as surely you do, you should also know the name of Anne Hutchinson, whom all are directly descended from. When Anne Hutchinson was living in colonial Boston, she was exposed to a lot of male preachers who at the time were preaching that if you had salvation you would act like it. If you did things like lie and cheat and steal you clearly weren't going to heaven. Ms. Hutchinson disagreed with that. To her that sounded a lot like the view that you were saved by works and not by grace. They first caught wind of Hutchinson's views when she was sailing on a ship from England to come settle in the New World and she asked some questions to the Reverend Zechariah Symmes after his sermons. These questions led to suspicion about her and they even

delayed her membership into the First Church in Boston, but soon enough everyone was satisfied that Ms. Hutchinson's views were okay, and they let her join the church. Well, she soon began having meetings with other women of the church that were a lot like today's bible studies where she found some people who agreed with her views on the bible. And she finally became enough of a threat to the male clergy that they put her on trial for heresy and threw her out of the colony. But at her trial she said to the judge and her accusers and all who could hear her "You have no power over my body, neither can you do me any harm, for I am in the hands of the eternal Jehovah". Tell me, should we forget people like Anne Hutchinson? Do the stories of all the faithful who came before us, really not matter? Not if you value your own faith. Not if you value being here today.

But though this day is about remembering all those who came before us, maturity in the Christian faith also means that we can't think about those who came before us without also thinking about those who are coming after us. You see, we cannot see someone else's moment in time, without also seeing our moment in time. Whether or not people believe who come after us matters too, whether or not they have faith matters too.

There are some people in the church for whom all this talk about future generations of believers is a lot of nonsense. They are sure to tell us that Jesus is coming back in the next few years or in the very near future, and they can prove it, they will tell you. All you have to do is to look at what is foretold in the bible and then look around at the current events, and you should know that the world will end and Jesus will come back before we ever get there. Well, to people who believe that, I have no doubt that Jesus will one day come back to us, and for all I know that day could be soon. But I also hope that such people will forgive me, if I tell them that

I see this view of history as a lot of adolescent obsession with the present tense, with the now. It is part of a belief like you had when you were twelve that we are the only people who ever mattered. When you know a few things about the generations of people who came before us, you know that many of them were also sure that they were living in the last days. They were also sure that all the signs in the bible were all about what was happening in their day. And with a little Christian maturity, you usually realize that what is needed is some humility about who we are in the long journey of history, and that just as there were generations of people in the faith who came before us, there will probably be generations who come after us.

Today we honor those who came before us, who made our faith possible through the struggle of their lives and who lived for the sake of a time that they would never get to see. One day, may others say of us that we did the same for them. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.