

**This is Real**  
**The Sunday after All Saints**  
**November 7, 2021**  
**The Rev. Katherine Bush**

I don't know if this is exactly how it happened, but what I remember is that Bishop Stough, retired and visiting from Alabama, stood up in the large room at St. Columba filled with exhausted teenagers to preach at the Closing Eucharist for Happening - a weekend retreat for high school students. I was in my twenties and standing at the back as an exhausted member of the adult support team. In my recollecting, Bishop Stough stood up, looked around the room, and said, "**this is real**," and sat down. I feel certain now that he actually said more than this. Who could believe a story where the bishop preaches a three-word sermon? It seems likely that he fluffed it up a bit, and explained that as these teenagers packed their bags and matched up with their parents to go home, that someone would probably say, "well, time to go back to the real world." And he wanted to be sure that they knew that **this** is real. This weekend of singing and staying up late and talking about things that matter and dancing and lighting candles and maybe washing feet and praying and eating and getting love poured into them, **this is real**.

It's quite common, as it turns out, to be told that something is not real. I was told I needed some "real world" experience before I could successfully go to seminary, as if the first twenty-some-odd years of my life had been imaginary, somehow not real. We pick up kids from camp or get on the plane to return home from vacation and someone quips, "back to reality." But wasn't the rest and the beauty and the food and the strangeness of the place - wherever it was and however long it lasted - wasn't that real?

Of course, it's not just the good stuff we apply this duality to. We sit in stark and sterile rooms while doctors tell us jargony news, and a part of our mind says, "this isn't real; this can't be happening to me." And we do it to others who want to tell us uncomfortable truths about their own lived experiences. We say "you're imagining things," "that's not what that's about," "that didn't really happen." As if because I don't experience racism, or you haven't been on the receiving end of sexism, that it just isn't real.

It's the Sunday when we talk about all the saints, how we are knit together in a mystical body, how there's a cloud of witnesses. We hear about a much more expansive family tree - that we are part of a lineage that includes some famed names like Mary and Martha, slightly lesser-known local-folks-made-good like Constance and Bishop Stough, plus over one-hundred-eighty names in the back of your bulletin and a person impacted by AIDS for every opening in that gorgeous sculpture. It's tempting to say, "oh, but that's not my **real** family," but that's as foolish as asking adoptive kids about their **real** parents. Or as ridiculous as suggesting that the friends who show up with casseroles and kleenex are not also **real** family. This is real. This is our family tree. No denying the shared heritage.

The proposal old Bishop Stough offered those kids is on offer today for us. **This is real.** And not just all the true stories of ancestors of whom we are proud and chagrined in often equal measure, but also the other true stories of today. “On this mountain, the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines ... and he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples and swallow up death and wipe away the tears from all faces.” This mountain is as real as the Rockies, and that meal is as real as the warm burrito in the hands of a guest this morning or your lunch after church. “I saw a new heaven and a new earth ... the home of God is among mortals, dwelling with them as their God, wiping every tear from their eyes and ... making all things new.” Now, we don’t usually argue about the tears being real. We know tears are all too real, yet we are still quick to say that the mountain and the feast and the dwelling place of God are somehow imaginary or like a fleeting vacation from reality. **But it’s actually all real.** The stench of the four-days-dead man is real, and so is the beautiful scene of him walking out trailing binding cloths.

Annie Dillard reminds me that “Beauty is not a hoax... Beauty is real.” She understands, though, how tricky it can be to maintain that position. For her it’s not denial, it’s simply forgetting. She writes, “No, I’ve gone through this a million times. Beauty is not a hoax ... Beauty is real. I would never deny it; the appalling thing is that I forget it.” Me? I suffer from both issues - denial and forgetting. Somedays it’s more one than the other, but either way I lose. I succumb to the idea that it’s all a hoax, or I get distracted and forget to even look around - for beauty, for love, for family, for the mountain.

But it’s all there, and it’s all real. This is real. Beauty is real, and so is death. Pain and love and feasts and tears, all real. The mountain is beautiful; the stench is overwhelming; resurrection is true. Our families, however we put them together, are real, and our families are twisted up into that enormous, sprawling family tree. Weekend retreats for teenagers are real, the walk I take in the Old Forest is just as real a part of my life as my desk and my computer. It’s not separate, it’s not different. I ought not quadrant my life into “real work” and everything else. If I do that, if we do that, we might start to think that there are other demarcations and quadrants. We could start to separate other experiences, forcing our lives into a series of either/or propositions. Worst of all, we might believe the hoax that heaven is separate from earth, and that one is more real than the other. But heaven and earth are both real, and they are deeply enmeshed.

Our real lives are intertwined with the kingdom and the saints. We don’t leave one world and enter another when we walk into or out of church or the woods or our homes or our offices or our classrooms. It’s not separate, none of it. The boundaries are not fixed - in fact, there might not be any boundaries at all. Because it’s all real. Nothing is separate. The home of God is among mortals. **This is real.**