

All Saints Sunday: Bubbling with the Saints

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I wonder whether someday, some graduate student in linguistics will tell the story of 2020 in terms of how we used the English language, and maybe even how the language changed.

Languages change, you know. To modern ears, the felicitous old King James translation of Psalm 119 verse 147 is confusing. When the psalmist says, "I prevented the dawning of the morning," it sounds like he had superpowers even beyond that of whoever invented Daylight Savings Time. It sounds like he stopped the rotation of the earth one morning, even if he wouldn't have understood that's how the dawn actually works.

According to Merriam-Webster, *prevent* means, first, "to keep from happening or existing." You have to read on to the fourth definition, which is labeled "archaic," to see that *prevent* used to mean "to go or arrive before."

Now, there was no particular Tuesday in Christendom when a committee decided that the meaning of the word *prevent* needed to shift. But it did. If I'd sent an email to the congregation saying I planned to prevent the arrival of all of you to the Levitt Shell this morning, you might not think I was just saying I'd get here earlier. Like that psalmist who got up before the dawn one day to cry.

Don't you love it when a preacher begins a sermon with a digression into the dictionary? Gripping stuff, isn't it?

Well, even though we're all about prevention in this age of coronavirus, that isn't one of the words I've noticed we've been using more frequently, more intensely, or even in slightly different ways. A few months ago a poet friend sent me a text message that read, "Can I just say I wish people would stop saying *uptick* and *spike* with such sadistic pleasure!" I asked whether he felt the same way about *surge* and he said it didn't have that abrasive "ka" sound, but that it was getting close to annoying/terrorizing.

Maybe you've also noticed that the word *unprecedented* is being used at *unprecedented* levels. Or that *bubble* has become a verb.

Actually *bubble* has been a verb for a while, but it used to describe only the way fountains, champagne bottles, or effervescent personalities send their contents out into the air. Prior to 2020, I don't recall ever having heard *bubbling* used to mean occupying the inside of a protective metaphorical membrane with certain other people, do you? My dictionary doesn't either.

Or is it possible that we haven't been able to prevent a shocking uptick, spike, and surge in overthinking things, given our bubbled existences? Ardelle says the last possibility seems likely, at least in one case she knows all too well.

The feast of All Saints, I think, is meant to go to work on the hearts of Christian people in a number of ways. One is that it's meant to expand our bubbles by expanding the bubble our definition of the Church lives within. Another is to see the Church, and by extension, all of humanity, as a living, growing, emergent, interconnected whole, of which any one of us is a tiny, but utterly unique and essential part. The communion of saints is vast and old and wondrous and awful at times, *and* it would be sadly incomplete if it didn't include you.

A little over a century ago, G. K. Chesterton famously got at the first point when he wrote, "Tradition means giving votes to the most obscure of all classes, our ancestors. It is the democracy of the dead. Tradition refuses to submit to the small and arrogant oligarchy of those who merely happen to be walking about."

Lovely, isn't it? The tradition that is All Saints Day is one way we expand the number of lives to which ours are bound. It's one way we learn to listen to people whose experiences of the world were wildly

different from our own. Which means they could see things we can't see. Wonder about things that seem settled to us. Hope for things we haven't the heart to hope for any more. People who can somehow still provide us fresh and faithful perspectives on what it means to be a human child of the God of the heavens, even if they wrote psalms about the sunrise, not knowing which celestial body circles which.

All Saints is the Church's annual attempt to get us to live in a larger bubble, and hopefully become better ancestors ourselves.

But bubbles have boundaries. Actually, bubbles *are* boundaries. That's all they are, right? So why have them? If God is One with a capital O, why should there be edges that define one group of God's children over and against another? If God's love has no limits, why should the definition of the Church?

Well, this is where I think we may need to unlearn something our bodies are confronted with every day right now. Because the purpose of defining the edges of the Christian Church by something like baptism is a near perfect inversion of why we bubble in the days of COVID-19. It's not to make sure we're not infected by those dangerous people on the outside. It's to prevent our getting away from the mess of humanity that's ended up with us on the inside... Inside the vast bubble of grace and damage we call Christianity.

It's a little like our approach to scripture. Thick as it is, almost all of the beautiful, godly, profound, and edifying things ever written were left out of the Bible. It's not just the Gospels of Thomas and Mary Magdalene languishing outside the canon of scripture. It's Saints Augustine and Julian of Norwich. It's Confucius and Shakespeare and Toni Morrison and Mary Oliver and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, just to name a few that come quickly to my mind.

The bigger scandal of scripture is not what got left out. It's what our forbears had the gall to leave in. You've read a bunch of it just by coming to church. You've heard the testimonies of wandering middle eastern nomads and seen their first great prophet waving away the buzzards after he's cut up quite a bit of livestock so God can pass through the carnage as a smoking firepot in the night. Spies and cities are saved by prostitutes. Battles are won when prophets like Deborah send generals and their chariots into a panic, one of them to be finished off with a tent peg to the temple by another terrifying woman named Jael. And there's the whole, beautiful but flawed character that is David, the adulterous, murdering poet king who is said to be a man after God's own heart.

And if you think everything gets better once sweet Jesus arrives, remember he wasn't exactly a fan of the nuclear family and told stories about people not getting into banquets because they're wearing the wrong outfit. And the whole thing ends with the psychedelic vision of one of his disciples, one of whose milder scenes we read a few minutes ago about some great and terrible ordeal his saints have to wash from their garments in the blood of a lamb, which somehow makes them white like snow.

Ok, maybe that quick trip through a small handful of scripture's more colorful moments of weirdness and wildness was unnecessary. And some of the most wondrously beautiful, grace-filled, heart-expanding stuff ever written down is in there as well. But do you see the connection? It is through the witness of all these forbears, in times and places and stories that are unimaginably strange to us that the hope of the good news of redeeming grace comes to us. If scripture is allowed to do its work on our hearts, it will not do so by limiting the boundaries of where we might encounter the God of unconditional, unlimited love. The boundaries of the Bible won't let us get away from these stories, insisting that these are our people whether we like it or not. If we've been baptized into the Christian bubble, the terrifying thing is who's here on the inside with us. But this is also a terrifying truth that still has the power to set us free.

You see, it's really pretty easy to love everybody, as Amber reminded us last week. But it can be hell to love particular people sometimes, and some people anytime at all. The Bible and the Communion of Saints are ways the Church forms us in the notion that the perfect, creative, self giving, love of God was not made for a less troubling world than ours. In fact, it's been witnessed in worlds far weirder than our best science fiction writers have yet to imagine.

And still the Church grows on. The boundaries of our bubble continue to stretch and expand with every baptism, as they will when we baptize little Britt in just a few moments. His life, whatever it holds, whatever he chooses, whoever he becomes, in all the wonders and terrors that will play out in his story, Britt lives now within our bubble. He's not just our responsibility, someone we're promising to love,

nurture, pray for, and form in the way of Jesus. He will also expand the ongoing story of the communion of Christian saints. He'll be one more life, and all of his life will be included, in the definition of Jesus's church. A Church that will be changed by his inclusion. Just as it was by yours.

It won't surprise you that anything I've just put forth that's the least bit faithful and true to Jesus is embedded much more concisely in his beatitudes. Which are lovely comforts, but also cut to the quick. There are no tent pegs or bloody goats. But every last one of them pushes our definition of blessedness out to include a few more people we're inclined to see as cursed.

One by one Jesus adds people to the bubble of blessedness. "That one over there with the broken and impoverished spirit? Blessed. The ones wailing with loss and heartbreak? Blessed. The meek ones and those who can't find any peace in their spinning minds because the world is such an unrighteous place? Blessed. Same for the merciful, the pure hearts, the makers of peace, the persecuted ones. And so are you. Not just when you're happy, centered, and well. But when you're reviled and counted among what's evil for who you are or what you've done or for whatever dark demon your presence stirs up in the person who's doing the reviling just now. Blessed. All of you. And every last part of you. Blessed."

Friends, I guess I keep preaching the same sermon. But I hope the truth of All Saints and the difficult transformation Jesus's way can work on our lives seeps only deeper into us. Like oil into the bones, as the psalmist said, in a strange metaphor from another world from mine that feels truer to what we need than anything my imagination will ever produce.

Our world, our country, our city, our neighborhoods, our families need people who have let the way of Jesus soak into their bones. Maybe especially this week, as we vote in what I suspect the saints among us who have voted in presidential elections a dozen times or more may say is the strangest, harshest, most severely divided of them all, as we seem to be bubbling ever more tightly with only our own kind.

So, maybe it's sufficient to the day that we commit to take the wisdom of All Saints with us first into the particular week that is to come. To let the scandalous inclusion of all sorts of sinners, us chief among them some days, in this bubbled and beloved Christian family of ours paradoxically be what breaks down what separates us from one another, and reveals in the concrete and complicated instance that is right here and right now, that in God, we warring and scattered humans are never more, and never less, than one.