

## THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS

*When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was nearer; for God thought, "If the people face war, they may change their minds and return to Egypt." So God led the people by the roundabout way of the wilderness toward the Red Sea. The Israelites went up out of the land of Egypt prepared for battle. And Moses took with him the bones of Joseph who had required a solemn oath of the Israelites, saying, "God will surely take notice of you, and then you must carry my bones with you from here." They set out from Succoth, and camped at Etham, on the edge of the wilderness. The LORD went in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day, to lead them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light, so that they might travel by day and by night. Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people.*

*Exodus 13: 17-22*

There is a crypt beneath the Basilica of St. Ambrose in Milan, Italy, which contains what may be either a disturbing sight or a moving sight. It is the skeleton of Ambrose himself, the fourth-century bishop who is revered not only for his theological writings but also for his Latin hymns, many of which we sing to this day. And in a Byzantine cathedral in Venice, the faithful pilgrims jostle with the curious tourists to get a glimpse of the purported bones of St. Mark. If you have traveled in Europe, you probably know that just about anywhere you go you can find a church that contains some skull of a saint or some fragment of a bone of a Christian martyr.

We Protestants, of course, no longer venerate the bones and relics of the saints. We may even consider such a practice a relic itself, a holdover from a medieval, superstitious past. We may remember that Martin Luther's program of church reform was partially prompted by an abuse of such relics to sell indulgences.

So, should we be somewhat embarrassed by the interest Moses shows in the bones of Joseph? In all the rush to take their leave of Egypt, when Moses has told the Israelites them to pack up only what they can carry, don't even put any yeast in your dough and let it rise, eat your unleavened bread with your staff in hand and your walking shoes on your feet—in the middle of all the bustle and chaos of the exodus from slavery, Moses stops everything and tells them he won't lead the people out of Egypt and into freedom until someone goes back and digs up the bones of Joseph? Is he just being a sentimental old fool? Or is he like Michael Scott, not superstitious but at least a little bit "stitious."

Well, first of all, we have to note that, as he point out, Moses is just keeping a long-standing promise. You remember the story of Joseph, how he was sold off by his brothers and ended up in Egypt only to rise to power under the Pharaoh. Then when famine hit Canaan, his brothers came to Egypt looking for help and through the mysterious and hidden work of God, their family and clan are rescued by the very one they had wronged. Joseph arranged for his father Jacob and the whole clan to re-settle in Egypt.

So, when Joseph was near death, he gathered his family and said, "I am about to die; but God will surely come to you, and bring you up out of this land to the land he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob." And in the very last words of the Book of Genesis, it says, "So Joseph made the Israelites swear, saying 'When God comes to you, you shall carry my bones up from here.'" (Gen. 50: 24-26)

The Book of Exodus takes up this story many generations after Joseph and his brothers. And it begins by stating that "a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph." It seems that the story of Joseph is in danger of being forgotten. Scott Black Johnston points out that to

know Joseph's story is to know how the Egyptians were able to work together with these Hebrew immigrants to avert a famine and save not only the people of Egypt, but the family and clan of Jacob, Joseph's father. He says, "Terrible consequences befall Egypt when a leader comes to power who does not know or appreciate Joseph's story and maybe that explains the obsession Moses has for Joseph's bones."

It is not because Moses seeks some kind of holy power from these remains. He makes clear that it is God, represented by pillars of fire and cloud, who is leading them out of bondage and into freedom. But to forget Joseph is to forget not only a promise, it is to forget the lessons of the past. To remember this saint, to keep his bones near, is to remember and honor not only his life but also the life of faithfulness he represents. And not just the faithfulness of Joseph, but maybe even more the faithfulness of God. The bones of Joseph serve as a reminder to keep alert, to be on the lookout for the mysterious and often hidden way of God in the world.

Scott says, "There are stories in our past, in our families, and in our communities—stories that inspire us, that compel us to work for a better future. And most of the time, these powerful stories come attached to bones, to the remains of the saints, to people whose lives are worth remembering and emulating." (from a sermon by Scott Black Johnston, October 25, 2020)

Maybe Gail Ramshaw is right, that the desire to be near the relics of the saints is about more than just squeezing some kind of magical power out of a dry bone. Maybe it is because deep down we know that "to be Christian is never to be alone." (*Words Around the Table*, p. 53) It is to be, as it says in the Apostles' Creed, in communion with the saints.

How often do we rattle off that phrase "the communion of saints," as we breeze through a recitation of the creed, without understanding or fully appreciating what we are affirming? It's more than just a veneration of apostles like St. Peter and martyrs like St. Catherine, or the holy mothers and fathers of the church like Mother Teresa and St. Ambrose. To affirm the communion of the saints is to take our place alongside the best and the worst of them.

Frederick Buechner adds that "On All Saints' Day, it is not just the saints of the church that we should remember in our prayers, but all the foolish ones and wise ones, the shy ones and overbearing ones, the broken ones and whole ones . . . who, one way or another, have been our particular fathers and mothers and saints, and whom we loved without knowing we loved them and by whom we were helped to whatever little we may have, or ever hope to have, of some kind of seedy sainthood of our own." (*The Sacred Journey*, p. 74)

Maybe no one shows us what the communion of the ordinary saints looks like better than a character from a novel by Wendell Berry. Jayber Crow is a bachelor barber in the small rural community of Port William, Kentucky, and the novel is written as his autobiography, his life story. He is not much of a churchgoer, but he began moonlighting as the janitor of the little Baptist church to supplement his meager barbering income.

He says, "At about that time, I started more or less regularly attending the Sunday morning service, partly because, after I had taken care of the place, I didn't want to appear indifferent to what went on there, and partly (I confess) to receive the women's compliments on my work. They thought I was doing a good job, and I loved to hear them say so."

But over time, Jayber starts to notice something about this Sunday morning gathering of the community. He says, "What they came together for was to acknowledge, just by coming, their losses and failures and sorrows, their need for comfort, their faith always needing to be greater, their wish (in spite of words and acts to the contrary) to love one another and to

forgive and be forgiven, their need for one another's help and company and divine gifts, their hope (and experience) of love surpassing death, their gratitude."

And then he remembers something of a vision he had once. He says, "One day when I went up there to work, sleepiness overcame me and I lay down on the floor behind the back pew to take a nap. Waking or sleeping (I couldn't tell which), I saw all the people gathered there who had ever been there. I saw them as I had seen them from the back pew, where I sat with Uncle Othy (who would not come in any farther). . . . I saw them in all the times past and to come, all somehow there in their own time and in all time and in no time; the cheerfully working and singing women, the men quiet or reluctant or shy, the weary, the troubled in spirit, the sick, the lame, the desperate, the dying, the little children tucked into the pews beside their elders, the young married couples full of visions, the old men with their dreams, the parents proud of their children, the grandparents with tears in their eyes, the pairs of young lovers attentive only to each other on the edge of the world, the grieving widows and widowers, the mothers and fathers of children newly dead, the proud, the humble, the attentive, the distracted—I saw them all. I saw the creases crisscrossed on the backs of the men's necks, their work-thickened hands, the Sunday dresses faded with washing. They were just there. They said nothing, and I said nothing. I seemed to love them all with a love that was mine merely because it included me. When I came to myself again, my face was wet with tears." (*Jayber Crow*, pp. 164-65)

We celebrate the communion of the saints of our church and of our lives, not because they are holier than anyone else, or because their remains have magical powers. We remember their lives and their stories as a way of remembering how God is at work in the world through the lives of the people who have been around us in the past and who are around us even now.

And their lives remain woven into the fabric of our lives. Like Moses carrying the bones of Joseph back to the Promised Land, we also continue to carry with us something of those we have known and loved, even when they are no longer here with us. And we journey toward the same promised land they have returned to, the place of peace and reconciliation, leaving behind whatever grievances and disappointments we may harbor toward each other, making our destination the place where the regrets we cling to about the way we treated each other are finally put to rest.

May it be so.