

The Making of Saints Readings: Psalm 24; Revelations 21:1-6a All Saints Day/B
By the Rev. Karen Faye Siegfriedt; St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Atascadero CA 11/03/24

At the end of the 19th century, a humble Scottish farmer named Hugh Fleming was working away on his farm when suddenly he heard piercing screams wafting across the farmland. Without a second thought, he abandoned his tools and raced towards the screams. He sees a child struggling in the swamp, trapped and in the process of drowning. Risking his own life, he pulls the drowning child to safety. The very next day, an expensive car drives up to Fleming's modest home. Out steps a distinguished gentleman—Randolph Churchill, father of Winston Churchill, the boy whom farmer Fleming saved, and who would become the future Prime Minister of England. Randolph Churchill offers to repay the farmer's bravery with money, but Fleming refuses, saying, "Saving someone is my duty; humanity has no price."

Just then, Fleming's own son appears at the door. Churchill asks, "Is this your son?" When Fleming nods in the affirmative, Churchill proposes an intriguing deal: If Fleming won't accept his money, he'll fund the boy's education at the finest schools, ensuring he gets the same opportunities as Churchill's own child. The father gratefully accepts, knowing that he could never afford such an education for his son who eventually goes on to attend St Mary's Medical School in London. His son becomes Sir Alexander Fleming, the inventor of penicillin. This discovery of penicillin has been described as the "single greatest victory ever achieved over disease." For this discovery, Fleming received the Nobel Prize in Medicine in 1945. One must never underestimate how a single act of kindness or a single act of courage can change the world in unexpected ways.

For instance, in 1960, my mother developed a severe case of pneumonia. Exhausted and in dire straits, she was immediately brought to the hospital, leaving her 5 young children at home. It was touch and go for several days at St. Elizabeth's hospital. Thankfully, it was this very penicillin, discovered by Alexander Fleming, that ultimately saved her life. But this story continues. While at that hospital visiting my mother, a nurse showed me an exceptional act of kindness and placed her nursing cap on my little head. By taking the time to make a personal connection, that nurse inspired me to attend nursing school some 11 years later.

Penicillin and subsequent next-generation antibiotics continue to bless all of humanity, saving us from the scourges of infectious diseases. I am sure that most of you sitting here today, have benefitted from this very drug. And so, on this day of All Saints, we celebrate all those 'lesser' saints, saints like Hugh Fleming who cared enough to pause what he was doing to save a life. We celebrate his son, Alexander Fleming, whose diligence and intelligent work made a salvific discovery in the history of medicine.

All Saints' Day was originally instituted to remember those many saints who did not have a special day marked on the church calendar; those who served as outstanding examples in our Christian journey. On this day, we remember the entire communion of saints: the top notched saints, the lesser-known saints, the generous and heroic people in our lives, and those friends and family who have struggled along the way but whom we still love and remember. Many of you have placed their names or photos under the altar in remembrance.

In today's biblical readings, the appointed psalm describes saints as "those who have clean hands and a pure heart, who have not pledged themselves to falsehood, nor sworn by what is a fraud. These are the ones who shall receive a blessing from the Lord and a just reward from the God of their salvation." (Ps. 24) We actually meet saints everywhere in our daily lives. They are the people behaving decently in an indecent society. They are the shining stars who love indiscriminately, walking in the way of Jesus. They are the ones who are "patient, brave, and true who toiled and fought and lived and died for the Lord they loved and knew... You can meet them in school, or in lanes, or at sea, in church, or in trains or in shops, or at tea... for the saints of God are just folk like me and I want to be one too!" (hymn #293)

In the second reading from the Book of Revelations, we get a glimpse of God's dream for this world; a world filled with saints where mourning and crying and pain will be no more. This is God's dream where a new humanity is born, where love rules and reigns, where walls come tumbling down. It is a new world order that is governed by peace, justice, and the dignity of every human being.

This dream of God refuses to accept the nightmare that our current world has become, where lying and deceit has become normalized; a world where the character of elected officials no longer matters, where war is simply accepted as part and parcel of our life.

So how will God's dream become a reality? I believe God is depending on each one of us to live a life of unselfish, inclusive, sacrificial love. It is this power of love, lived out in our daily lives, that will ultimately shape a beloved community. Every time you set aside someone else's fault or blemish, every time you pray for someone who has treated you poorly, every time you try to see what Christ sees in another person, every time you pause to show compassion to another, you have brought grace into the world and thus have brought God's dream a little bit closer.

People of St. Luke's, I believe that *you* are the saints in the making. I see it when you care for one another in times of sickness and death. I see it in your passion for outreach, sharing your time, talent, and treasure to benefit those on the margins. I see it in the commitment of the Daughters of the King who are seated before us; those whose vision is to know Jesus Christ, to make Him known to others, and to become reflections of God's love through a life-long program of Prayer, Service, and Evangelism. I see it when you witness your individual love for the lost, the lonely, and the left behind. In summary, you are the saints in the making! You are those ordinary people doing extraordinary things!

On November 20, 1910, Pauli Murray was born in Baltimore Maryland to parents of mixed racial origins, whose ancestors included black slaves. At the age of three, her mother died and soon after, her father began to experience mental health problems. Her relatives took custody of the children and Pauli turned out to be an exceptional student. Over the years, despite being discriminated against because of her race and gender, she did not despair but rather held onto hope, dedicating her life as a civil rights leader.

In 1940, Murray sat in the whites-only section of a Virginia bus with a friend, and they were arrested for violating state segregation laws. This incident led her to pursue her career goal of working as a civil rights lawyer. She enrolled in the law school at Howard University. However, she was denied the chance to do post-graduate work at Harvard University because of her gender. She called such prejudice against women "Jane Crow", alluding to the Jim Crow laws that enforced racial segregation in the Southern United States. In 1965 she became the first African American to receive a Doctor of Juridical Science degree from Yale Law School.

Inspired by her connections with other women in the Episcopal Church, Murray later attended General Theological Seminary where she received a Master of Divinity. She was ordained in 1977 and became the first African American woman ordained as an Episcopal Priest. Starting her life as a poor, black, orphaned child growing up in the south, Pauli Murray went on to become an American civil rights activist, advocate, legal scholar, author, and priest. To this day, Murray is regarded as one of the most important social justice advocates of the twentieth century. She is so important that her picture can be found on the back of a newly minted U.S. coin with the word "HOPE." Murray believed that significant societal reforms are possible when rooted in hope. In her poem "Dark Testament," she characterizes hope as "A SONG IN A WEARY THROAT." Hope is the conviction that the future holds new possibilities that are not evident in the present.

So on this Feast day of All Saints, a time when we are preparing to elect our next president, a time when fear knocks at our door, I want to remind you to hold onto hope. Afterall, fear is the real enemy. In just a moment, Steph will be passing out an envelope containing a 25-cent piece with St. Pauli Murray's image. Take a moment to open the envelop, read the inscription, and then reflect on God's dream for yourself, for your country, and for our world. Take a moment to reflect on all the saints in your life who have chosen hope over fear. For without hope, the human heart would break.