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# I Sing a Song of the Saints of God

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A Sermon By  
The Rev. Andrew W. Walter

November 4, 2018  
All Saints' Sunday  
Grace Episcopal Church  
Silver Spring, Maryland

*An audio version of this sermon may be found on the Grace Church website at*  
<http://graceepiscopalchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/2018-11-04-AWW.mp3>.

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Wisdom of Solomon 3:1-9  
Revelation 21:1-6a  
John 11:32-44

*I sing a song of the saints of God,  
patient and brave and true,  
who toiled and fought and lived and died  
for the Lord they loved and knew.*

One of my personal heroes has always been the Catholic Archbishop Oscar Romero. Some of you may be very familiar with Romero, while for others, his name might be brand new. Either way, I'd like to share a little of his story with you on this important All Saints' Sunday.

Oscar Romero was one hundred years ago, in 1917, in El Salvador. His father wanted to train him as a carpenter, because education didn't necessarily lead to a secure future in El Salvador, but with a trade, like carpentry, a person could provide for their family. Despite showing real talent for carpentry, Romero yearned for something else. He felt a call to the priesthood, which didn't surprise others who knew him, and so Romero began the long process of studying for holy orders, ultimately finishing his seminary education in Rome.

After ordination, Romero served as a parish priest for 20 years, before being appointed as a bishop, and a few years after that, as Archbishop of San Salvador. Some of the more progressive Catholic priests were unhappy with Romero's appointment as Archbishop because, up until that point, Romero tended to be more conservative in his behavior and theology, particularly when it came to the Salvadoran government.

At the time, El Salvador was run by one authoritarian leader after another, with each successive regime using their power to oppress the Salvadoran people. The country's socioeconomic inequality was immense, the people at the bottom of the ladder, the small farmers and peasants, living in extreme poverty.

Many of Catholic priests spoke out against the government and worked to empower the people into changing the ways things were. This was the birth of what we call Liberation Theology, a movement that sought to put religious faith into practice, by aiding the poor and oppressed through political action. The priests preached about the sinful structures of society that caused injustice and inequality, and they encouraged the people to get involved in changing those structures.

But, not Romero, not until one of the priests, a good friend of Romero's, was murdered by the security forces of El Salvador. "When I looked at his body lying there dead," Romero said. "I thought, 'If they have killed him for doing what he did, then I too have to walk the same path.'"

From that point on, Romero began speaking out against the government, against poverty and injustice, assassinations and torture. When a new government came into power amidst a wave of human rights abuses, Romero wrote to the President of the United States, criticizing the U.S. for providing military aid to the government.

Romero's activism brought international recognition but also a number of death threats. Romero didn't care. He just kept doing what he was doing. On March 23, 1980, Romero gave a sermon during which he called upon Salvadoran soldiers, as Christians, to follow and stop carrying out the government's repression and violations of basic human rights.

The next day, Romero celebrated Mass at a local church, and as he finished his sermon, stepping down from the pulpit and moving to the center of the aisle, right in front of the altar, a gunman entered the church and shot Romero straight through the heart, killing him instantly. All Oscar Romero wanted to do was follow Jesus, to help the poor people of his country, to give voice to their pain and struggles, and he was killed by government death squad.

That may sound like a sad story to you, but I'm not sure Romero would agree, because a long time ago, he wrote:

*It helps, now and then, to step back and take the long view.  
The Kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision.  
We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of  
the magnificent enterprise that is God's work.  
Nothing we do is complete, which is another way of saying  
that the Kingdom always lies beyond us.  
  
No statement says all that should be said.  
No prayer fully expresses our faith.  
No confession brings perfection.  
No pastoral visit brings wholeness.  
No program accomplishes the church's mission.  
No set of goals and objectives includes everything.  
  
This is what we are about.  
We plant seeds that will one day grow.  
We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.  
We lay foundations that will need further development.  
We provide yeast that produces effects far beyond our capability.  
We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation  
that enables us to do something, and to do it very well.  
  
It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way,  
an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.  
We may never see the end results, but that is the difference  
between the master builder and the worker.  
We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs.  
We are prophets of a future not our own.*

Today is All Saints Sunday, a day when we celebrate all of the faithful Christians who have gone before us. Most of us think of saints as people who have some sort of holiness about them, people who reflect an extra closeness to God and lived in such a way that pointed all of us toward God and God's will for this world. We think of saints as people like Oscar Romero, and that's completely understandable. Three weeks ago today, Oscar Romero was canonized by Pope Francis in a ceremony at St. Peter's Square attended by 70,000 people. Oscar Romero was officially declared a saint.

But, in the Bible, the word "saint" refers to any Christian, even the most ordinary of regular people: people with the same quirks and weaknesses and idiosyncrasies as you and me; people who weren't perfect, by any stretch of the imagination, but did the best they could to live a faithful life no matter what came their way. In their own way, these saints planted seeds and watered seeds for a better future. They laid foundations for us to follow. They were workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs. These saints were our parents and grandparents, husbands and wives, brothers and sisters, people we know and people we don't know.

I'm sure all of you can think of a few of these saints from your own lives. People who have made a difference in your life, people who loved you and supported you, people who believed in you and made you a better person, people who enriched your life, just by being part of it.

Since we are supposed to remember those people today, I am going to invite all of us to take a moment and think of those people. I invite you to say their name, either silently to yourself, or feel free to share it out loud. I've got my watch here, and I'll keep track of the time. But, just one moment to remember those people who shined a little light and made a difference in our lives...

As most of you know, for several months, I was a candidate for bishop of Arizona. It was a deeply spiritual journey for me and for my wife, Susan, because it meant opening ourselves up to what God might be calling us to do, and because it meant contemplating the possibility of leaving Grace Church. Throughout the discernment process, one constant we experienced was the love and support from all of you. So many of you came up to offer prayers, and best wishes, and words of encouragement. And, you did that, even though you knew we might be leaving. I cannot tell you how much it meant to us. To us, you reflected the love of God. To us, you all are saints, and we just want to say thank you.

*I sing a song of the saints of God,  
patient and 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 mean to be one too.*

Amen.