

**November 5, 2023 All Saints' Sunday**

**Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church**

**First John 3:1-3**

**"Just Lean Back"**

**Douglas T. King**

I did my best to lean back into the nothingness. My feet were on solid ground. But the rest of me felt like it was lost in the ether and about to hurtle down into calamity. I was a Boy Scout and we were learning how to repel down the side of a cliff. Anyone that has ever tried this knows the key is that you need to trust your harness and rope enough to lean all the way back and be nearly perpendicular with the surface upon which you are repelling. The problem of course is that the natural reaction is not to lean back into the unknown but to lean forward toward the known terra firma. which causes you to slam against the cliff and smush your face. And that is no way to make a journey down the side of a cliff. But when you do learn to trust and lean back, you are amazed at what a glorious journey it is, repeatedly hopping out and down, gliding, nearly flying along.

Hold on to this image for a moment while we pivot to a little theology. On All Saints' Sunday we are reminded of all those who have gone before us, who have now gone on to greater glory. We give thanks for their faithfulness and the foundation they have provided for us as individuals and as the church. We also acknowledge that they have indeed become saints, one and all. This does not mean that while they made their way through this world they led a life of perfection, spiritual or otherwise. What this acknowledges is that God has perfected them in the loving arms found in eternity.

As the church we speak a lot about justification. Every week we confess our sins and celebrate that through God's grace we are forgiven, our relationship with the divine is justified. But that is only the first step of the journey on which God is leading us. We are also called forward into sanctification. We are called to live lives that are a reflection of God's loving grace. We are called to be present in the world the way in which Jesus was present in the world. We are called to a dress rehearsal of our sainthoods.

I have to say we do not do as good a job of focusing on this. The immediate and obvious reason for this is fairly simple. We like being forgiven for all of the ways we are selfish, immature, and generally deeply imperfect. But stepping into changing our behavior to live as people who honor how God calls us to live is an awful lot of work. And, what's more, we doubt we have it in us to really change.

But I think there is something deeper than that at play here. The underlying issue is that we do not trust enough in the power of God's grace to truly change us. We trust grace to forgive us but we do not believe God's grace can or will transform us. We doubt God's power to truly heal what is broken within us; to lead us from selfish to generous, from entitled to grateful, from judgmental to forgiving. We know who we are and we trust that is always who we will be. We are like I was when I started to walk myself over the side of that cliff with that repelling gear on. Instead of leaning back into the unknown empty space behind me I kept leaning into the known solid ground before me. And subsequently I kept smushing my face against the cliff. We make our lives more difficult by not leaning back into the power of God's transforming grace.

Our text from the first letter of John speaks to our limited vision. We are told, "Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has yet to be revealed. What we do know is this: when God is revealed, we will be like him..." Our journey to be healed and whole and on our way to holy is not a solitary one. Yes, we have a role to play. Yes, it is hard work to grow into the people we are called to be. But, no we do not engage in this task alone.

We were created in the image of God and it is God who will lead us into discovering that image within us. We may not understand how it is possible for us to be so changed, but it is not merely possible, it is promised. All the limitations that bind us will be released. All of our rough edges will be smoothed out. All of our bumps and bruises will be healed. Surveying all of my own limitations, edges, and bruises, I have to tell you that it greatly strains my imagination to trust in this reality.

But when I return to the text I am reminded that we are also told that God will be revealed to us. Such a helpful reminder. Sometimes when we think about all of the Bible passages we know; and all of the theological notions we have thrown around; and, heaven forbid, the sermons we have heard, we can begin to think we have a pretty good handle on this whole God concept. As if the boundless creator of all of existence could be summed up in a book or a lecture or a human theory of any kind.

We have been blessed with the enormous gift of receiving a window into the identity of the divine. The life of Jesus Christ and the testimony of all scripture have given us insight into God. But if we allow ourselves to believe we know God in

any all-encompassing manner we are engaged in hubris. We can only envision the tip of the iceberg of the depth and breadth of the divine's power and glory.

When we doubt our ability to be transformed, we are leaning into a limited vision of God. We are ignoring the vastness of the divine which is beyond our ability to conceive at this point. We are heedless to the angel Gabriel's words to young Mary, "...nothing will be impossible with God." On All Saints' Sunday there are two causes for celebration. We celebrate the power of God and all that God has done for those who have gone on to greater glory. As we remember our beloved ones who have died, we celebrate that they have been completely transformed in their loving embrace with the divine in eternity. They have been led beyond all of the ways life may have wounded them. They have been led beyond all of their own personal failings. They have been led beyond everything that was keeping them from being a reflection of God's perfect, loving grace. They are completely who God created them to be and in that completion have absolute peace. That is the first cause for celebration.

The second cause for celebration is this, we are on that very same journey. We will be completely transformed in our loving embrace with the divine in eternity. We will be led beyond all of the ways life may have wounded us. We will be led beyond all of our own personal failings. We will be led beyond everything that is keeping us from being a reflection of God's perfect, loving grace. We will be completely who God created us to be and in that completion have absolute peace.

And we can start this miraculous journey today. To do this we need to stop limiting how we think about God's transforming power. We need to stop leaning into the ground we always stand

on, what we already know and all of the ways we continue to smush our faces. We need to trust in our God enough to lean back into the unknown, into God's transforming grace, into the ourselves we have yet to be. And when we do so we will be amazed at what a glorious journey it will be and where it will lead us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.