

MOMENTS THAT DEFINE US



"We are not what we know but what we are willing to learn."

- Mary Catherine Bateson

Scripture:

Mark 14:27-36

A moment of decision

27. And Jesus said to them, "You will all become deserters; for it is written, 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.'
28. But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee,"
29. Peter said to him, "Even though all become deserters, I will not."
30. Jesus said to him, "Truly I tell you, this day, this very night, before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times."
31. But he said vehemently, "Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you." And all of them said the same.
32. They went to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, "Sit here while I pray."
33. He took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be distressed and agitated.
34. And he said to them, "I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here and keep awake."
35. And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him.
36. He said, "Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want."



REFORMATION SUNDAY

This is Reformation Sunday, and it is also the Sunday before Halloween. Both of these holidays celebrate spiritual transformations. Our text from scripture is one of the most powerful descriptions of a moment of transition in all literature. It is the moment in the life of Jesus when he went to the Garden of Gethsemane and prayed that God would show him what he had to do.

There is a church called the Church of All Nations just outside the eastern gate to Jerusalem, that celebrates that prayer, and that moment, and that resolve. I go to that location every time I am in Jerusalem, and remember the moment when Jesus prayed, "Not my will, but thy will be done." This was a character shaping and character revealing decision point in his life. When we finish this morning, I am going to ask if you can recall the five most important decision points in your own life that

you would remember – moments that you would remember if I were to take you to this place where it is said that Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane.

THE ELECTIONS

Transformations lead people from hopeless to hopeful. Doors open, and people walk through them.

People who felt locked in a cage or box find the oomph to lift the top off the box or bang down the door to the cage, or sneak out through a window someone forgot to close.

People who were down get up. Maybe not totally or forever - but some joy sneaks into the place where depression once reigned.

People who have lost power or money find the resources they need to survive.

SALVATION

Christians often speak of these kinds of defining moments as salvation. Salvation - as in "are you saved?" - comes from the root word Shalom, which is the Hebrew word meaning a combination of justice and peace. A secular word for salvation is safety or security. Salvation is when we don't worry so much.

Walter Brueggemann says that God's purpose in history is, and always has been, to "redistribute power" so that all God's people share in the abundance. When we speak of our own transformation we cannot forget God's purpose.

At our best, we join God's transforming purpose that is to bring the creation back to its origin in God.

So when we think of decision points, let us think with reference of the time that we, like Jesus, chose the God who has chosen us.

HALLOWEEN

This is the week of the second most popular holiday in America. Have you finished preparing and decorating? Several of my neighbors added fresh dust to their tombstones, picked up a few brand new ghosts, and put out novel spider webs to celebrate. Along McDonald Avenue, houses are beginning to set up the elaborate tableaux and crime scenes that will fill the side walks this year, and bring joy to children from all over the city, and fill the neighborhood with people. Only a true scrooge, living on McDonald Avenue, would refuse to decorate their windows, put out dozens of flood lights, and carve scary faces in pumpkins that are placed along the porches and sidewalks.

Congress has extended Daylight Savings Time this year into November. Why? So that families celebrating Halloween this holiday will not have to send their children out begging for candy late into the evening after the sun has gone down.

WHAT'S GOING ON HERE?

I watched a recent documentary on Halloween that traced this holiday to Northern Ireland and Celtic country. Customs such as carrying a Jack-o-Lantern, bobbing for apples, wearing costumes, and

doing scary things date back centuries to places far away. Our holiday is based upon the Druid priests' teachings that as summer becomes winter, the atmosphere of earth becomes more porous. This permits the connection of the spirits of the dead, with the spirits of the living. Some of these are happy spirits, but some of them are evil spirits. Evil spirits seem much more interesting to us in the 21st Century.

ALL SAINTS DAY

Halloween is the evening of All Saints Day. This is, in part, a fall celebration of the crops and the harvest. Winter in the north is cruel and hard. If you don't have your crops harvested and put up for safe keeping by now, you will not be able to replace them for six months or more. November brings a message with it. This is the "*do or die*" time of year. During the course of the winter, those *who have not done* risk death, while others *make do*.

This transition from the season of life to the season of death in the northern climes, gives us the right atmospheric conditions for the spirits of the departed to contact the spirits of those who are not yet departed. Maybe. There are some spirits that we would dearly love to contact, and others, not so much.

I'M NOT A DRUID, BUT...

I'd like to thank a few people another time for the sacrifices they made for me. I'd like to hear how it was to discover the rotation of the planets, and discover the circulatory system of the human body. What would it have been like to dine with Jesus on the rolling hills above the Sea of Galilee?

But the stories of infants who died of chicken pox, Indians who were starved on the reservations, and people who were objects of discrimination because of the color of their skin or the ideals of freedom they embraced, these spirits would be harder to hear.

ADAPTED BY CHRISTIANS

So it was All Saints Day, a Celtic holiday that was adapted as a Christian observance that gave shape to All Saints Eve. Saints were hallowed, so it was "All Hallows Eve." Food was placed outside for the spirits, just as food is still left out on gravesites by certain traditions right here in Santa Rosa at the Memorial Park. That is the origin of

Trick or Treat. Graveyards were the places of both joyous reunions and terrifying encounters.

In the tradition of All Hallows Day, All Saints Day, we will read the names of those who died from within our community in the last year. These were good people. Reading this list will give some of you a lump in the throat, and it should. But I hope most of you will also smile. The blessing was theirs, and it is greater than the loss.

THE REFORMATION

Also this week, Presbyterians join other Protestants (including Episcopalians, Dutch Reformed, and Lutherans) all over the world in celebrating Reformation Sunday which is today. It is always the Sunday before All Hallows Eve, when Martin Luther nailed the 95 Theses to the door of the Catholic Church in Wittenberg. And they were the spark for the Protestant Reformation in Europe, which also was spread to the United States by the European explorers and pilgrims. The Theses contained *95 articles of debate* – that’s what Luther wanted to do. These were lists of abuses in the Catholic Church of the time. He opposed the selling of indulgences, abuse of power and privilege, and allegiance to Rome.

POSTING

It was common to place notices on the door of the church. Moments after they were posted, they were taken down, and rushed to the Gutenberg printing press and distributed throughout Germany, and beyond. The 95 Theses became the charter of the Protestant Reformation from which our church was born.

People wanted to read the scriptures in their own language, they wanted the priest to face the congregation rather than stand as intermediary to God, and they wanted a democratic form of government.

They wanted to stop paying for the architecture, and opulence of the church, and for empire building in foreign countries.

What began with a vision in the conscience of Martin Luther soon became the chant of entire

peoples of Germany, The Netherlands, Scotland and beyond.

The Protestants were the ones who protested.

It was their watchword that “**we are reformed and always reforming.**”

I hope that is still true.

It gets Protestants involved in complex social issues, and moral issues, and values issues. Many of us are values voters, rather than surrogates of a particular political party. That frustrates party bosses, and drives one issue people to desperation. However, you and I could do worse than be termed values voters. I rather like it.

- So that’s All Saints Day.
- And Reformation Day.

These are defining days for our culture and our church.

Druid holidays are not my favorite, but they provide a context for our own decision days and decision points.

BITTER/BETTER

Here is what a woman had to say about one of her own defining moments:

Your wedding day, the birth of a child, the loss of love. In life there are many moments that define us. Five years ago today was one such moment for me. It was on that day that my life, my children’s lives, so many lives would be forever changed. It was about two in the afternoon before I began to worry that I hadn’t heard from Ed yet, that he wasn’t answering his phone, that he wasn’t returning my calls. ... (Her husband had died.)

I was told early on by a well meaning pastor that I had a choice. I could choose to have this moment make me bitter or better. At the time, I had a few choice words for him under my breath, which would definitely lean toward the first of his choices. But after time, those words would ring in my head. Bitter or better. But it wasn’t a single choice. I had to each day, each new situation, choose the latter. Many days, I did not. I was bitter. I was angry. I felt abandoned, guilty, sad, furious. But each day God granted me a little more acceptance, a little more hope, a little more grace.

...Here I am. five years later. Still standing. And, I might say, I am a better person for what I have survived. A much better person. Still growing in that, far from perfect, but I am glad to see that I allowed life’s inequities to not hold me down.

I am so grateful for my new chance at life, for the love I have found, for having family and friends that love me, for the God who makes it all possible.

Still I remember, Edward Thomas King,
July 28, 1959 - August 13, 2002.

THE GARDEN OF GETHSEMANE

The experience that Jesus had in the Garden of Gethsemane just prior to his arrest and subsequent crucifixion was his true, divine-defining moment. That was the moment he actually became the Christ, as his egoic self finally and totally gave way to his pure spiritual essence. He fully gave his spirit, mind, and body back to God. In this surrender, any and all sense of separation from God was dissolved.

"And being in agony He was praying very fervently; and His sweat became like drops of blood, falling down upon the ground." "Drops of blood" is a metaphor depicting the fact that he was deeply enmeshed in fear.

If we read the rest of the story, we notice that from the moment Jesus made the divine surrender through the moment of his crucifixion, fear, anxiety, and uncertainty were no longer a part of his reality. Even as he stood before Pilate, when asked if he was the king of the Jews, his response wasn't one of someone coming from fear. He calmly said, "It is as you say." He had no need to argue, deny, or defend, because in his defining moment his true identity had been realized and he knew who he really was. Who Pilate said he was didn't matter.

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

"I do the very best I can, I mean to keep going. If the end brings me out all right, then what is said against me won't matter. If I'm wrong, ten angels swearing I was right won't make a difference."

Abraham Lincoln

NO SHORTCUTS

"Be sure you are right, then go ahead." This not license to rush headlong into our desires and pleasures. One is never right at someone else's expense. One is never right cheaply. Shortcuts are never a part of being right. There are no shortcuts on a straight road!

So have you thought about your own Top 5 life changing decisions?

- Martin Luther nailed the 95 Theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. Even he was surprised when his questions were the same as most of the people in Germany.

- John Calvin started a public school in his church because he thought education should be for everyone, not just the elite.
- John Wittenberg believed that the Bible should be available in the language that common people could read.
- Today in Pismo Beach, Robert Crouch is remembering a Presbyterian minister named Henry Highland Garnet, who was invited by President Abraham Lincoln to address the nation's leaders; he rose up to offer a sermon on freedom and justice for all Americans. It was a life-changing event for him, and for those who heard it.

And so today we read the names of those whose lives changed our lives. Some of these people might be on someone's top five list.

Now, as we remember the saints who have lived with us, and now live eternally with God, will you please stand.

Lord God, to thy eternal care we commend ourselves, and also the names of the following members of our congregation who have joined their maker in the last year. They have helped us define our faith, our values, and our honor, and so we honor them.

RINGING OF THE BELLS

**Bill Bradley
Allan Anderson
Louise Taylor
Jim Reif
Roma Richardson
Velma Moxley
Pauline Henry
Hal Brown
Jean Gartin
Bob Stark
Margaret Gaffney
Maude Humm
Stan Strout**



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