

“In the footsteps of saints”  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
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*Joshua 3:7-17*

by Rev. Patrick D. Heery

Every summer, when I was a boy, I trudged into my grandmother’s backyard, slammed gloves onto my hands, got on my knees, and began the long day’s work of pulling up English ivy. Every year, the ivy spread, choking out the grass, digging its fibrous roots into the surface of trees, fences, and the back wall of the house. And every year, I was summoned to pull it up, until it was confined yet again to the garden. Who did I have to thank for this unending battle of childhood tedium? My grandfather—who years ago had decided that English ivy would look nice in the backyard. It did look nice, until it took over... everything. Including a young boy’s free time that could have been spent riding bikes or playing with friends. (No, I’m not bitter at all!)

I’ll add English ivy to the list of things I would rather not inherit from previous generations, along with disco, climate change, and radioactively white skin [holds up arm]. But English ivy is nothing compared to what the children of the Exodus inherited from their parents. Their parents had had the chance to enter the promised land, but instead had given into fear and doubt, refusing to cross the Jordan. They’re the reason they’ve wandered for 40 years in the wilderness.

We are thus reminded that when we talk of the dead as “saints,” we are not speaking about their saintly virtues. The people who have come before us—our parents and grandparents, our teachers and pastors, our nation’s leaders and guardians, even the people in the Bible—are no fairy tale heroes. They are human, like us, beautiful and flawed, prone to mess up, sometimes in really big, awful ways.

And yet we wouldn’t be here without them. The children of the Exodus wouldn’t be standing again on the shores of the Jordan, if their parents had not for 40 years told them of their mistake and begged them not to repeat it, if for 40 years their parents had not kept hope alive and told them about the God who rescued them from slavery in Egypt and who could rescue them again.

Truth is I’m thankful for that English ivy. My grandfather died the year before I was born. I never got to meet him, never got to hear his laugh, listen to his stories, or hold his hand. But I did get to touch something that he had touched. I did get to tend the garden that he had tended. And next to me, as I pulled ivy or raked leaves or planted flowers, my grandmother talked and told stories. She brought me ice-cold lemonade. And she taught me a faith that’s like gardening. You have to work at it daily, with great care, trusting that something unseen moves beneath the surface. And when you work at it, when you water and feed it just right, no matter how hard or endless it seems, little unseen things grow into big beautiful things. Love and patience take root. And somehow the flower’s bud never loses its capacity to surprise. Because the growth isn’t your doing. It’s a gift. Worthy of adoration.

She taught me that, all while I pulled ivy and planted seeds.

So I give thanks for English ivy, just as I imagine the children of the Exodus gave thanks for their parents as they faced once again the waters of the Jordan.

When they arrived, the river's banks had been flooded by the spring rains. The current was strong and dangerous. It stood before them, a reminder of their parents' shame as well as their hope, a barrier between them and the promise. And then some brave soul stepped into that water.

They stepped into that water carrying the story of Moses parting the Red Sea. They carried the memory of manna in the desert and the words of their parents. They carried the Ark of the Covenant and a reminder of God's promise. They carried the memory of Noah, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Joseph and his brothers, the rod of Aaron, the song of Miriam. All moments leading to this one.

When Joshua stands in that riverbed, his feet sinking in the mud, the waters parted on each side of him, this huge smile, a boy's smile, sweeping across his face, when he sees the other side of the Jordan and can practically taste the milk and the honey, he stands in the footprint of Moses.

The priests go first, followed by a leader of each of the 12 tribes. They risk the current. They walk across the river, and then wait on the other side until all have passed. These who follow walk in the footprints of the ones who went ahead of them.

Just as men of each tribe walk ahead, bearing the ark of the Lord, raising the waters, and leading God's people who follow, so too have saints gone ahead of us, carrying the Word, creating a way for us, and we follow. They are not saints because of their perfection. They are saints because God makes them saints, because in walking—or in stumbling—God finds them on the other side. God washes them clean.

These saints wait on the other side; they wait until all have finished crossing. We shall meet them again. In the meantime, we remember, and we give thanks for the way made clear.

I don't tell you anything you don't know already. You know that your life is the handiwork of those who came before you. I simply ask that you pay attention. That you take the time to look down and witness the footprints you stand in. That you take note of who braved the waters before you, who gave you reason to trust that you too can cross to the other side.

God asks that you consciously walk in the presence of those saints. That you give thanks for the soldiers who died for you, for the people who dreamt and built this church, for the prophets of justice lynched for your freedom, for the artists who showed you the world as it could be, for the parents and the teachers who planted seeds—or vines of ivy—in your life, for the One who lived, died, and was resurrected for you.

Far from creating a backward-looking people caught in atrophy, I believe this consciousness, this ever-present gratitude, makes us bolder, braver, and more faithful. We step forward, knowing that others walk with us, before and behind us. We live well, we love without restraint, we waste

not a moment, because people lived, and some died, for us to have this moment. They—when thought upon—make this moment so much more, so much fuller.

We walk through parted waters in the footsteps of saints. So let us take the time to share this moment with them. **Amen.**