

Revelation 7: 9-17 "A Handkerchief from God" 11/1/20 Rev. Janet Chapman

My withdrawal from movies finally got the best of me this past week and I went to see the movie "A Call to Spy," a narrative based upon the true story of recruitment and training of women spies in England, 1941. Churchill was losing the fight against the Nazis and therefore a newly formed Special Operations Executive branch began seeking out a courageous and diverse group of women to live under the radar in France. One SOE officer at the time grumbles to his fellow male intelligence agents, "Get used to lady spies," as it was determined they could evade detection and suspicion easier than men. Using what was beautifully characterized as "ungentlemanly warfare," they were able to sabotage, subvert and resist Nazi plans. Wireless operators who spoke French were especially in high demand as it had become increasingly difficult to get solid intel from heavily occupied France. The work was very dangerous and each SOE agent was given cyanide pills before departing, an option far more preferable than falling into the Gestapo's hands. In the movie, we meet two intriguing women, one an American aspiring diplomat with a wooden leg and the other a Sufi woman of Indian descent who was an avid pacifist. The American quickly grew dear to my heart as an example of what people with prosthetics can accomplish and the British Muslim, a highly gifted wireless operator, revealed fierce devotion to her nonviolent values. Her name was Noor which means light in Arabic and her mantra was to let her light shine through. Her name and life story reminded me of that little boy who had toured with his parents several historical churches with stained glass windows of saints stationed all around, and when he was asked what he learned about saints, he said, "A saint is someone who lets the light shine through."

On All Saints Day, with the election on the horizon and Veterans Day just over a week away, I found this movie to be both relevant and inspiring. It was a reminder that if there is

anything our world needs right now, it's those who let the light shine through – several million of them I suppose. The problem is we hear the word “saint” and we dismiss it as having nothing to do with us, unless of course you are of the New Orleans variety. Yet naming those whom we honored today should teach us that the definition of a saint is not dependent on a high and holy manner but rather is far more attainable than we might guess. Frederich Buechner writes that “in God’s holy flirtation with the world, God occasionally drops a handkerchief. These handkerchiefs are called saints.” This seems to suggest that saint-making is more God’s business than our own, but either way, the main thing is that saints do exist in our day and time. There really are ordinary men and women whose love of God has led them to do extraordinary things, which means none of us can shrug our shoulders and say sainthood is beyond our reach.

In addition, it would be a mistake to assume you must be dead to be a saint. Unfortunately, this is a requirement for canonization in the Catholic Church, but the truth is there are living saints in the making all over the place. There are those who project a oneness with the world, who are filled with loving compassion and have a purpose of being in service to others. There are those who are working towards that goal day by day in their lives. Please keep in mind that saints aren’t perfect by any means as past stories of them will reveal – St. Francis rolled naked in the snow to defend himself against his lusty thoughts; yeah that ought to do something to the libido I would think. St. Christopher was on his way to work for the devil when a mysterious hermit recruited him for God instead. St. Mary of Egypt was a prostitute for 17 years before she became a desert mother for the next 50, and St. Bernard was one of the organizers of the second crusade, which collapsed into an orgy of pillage and looting. Generally

speaking, the saints are not distinguished by their goodness but by the extravagant love of God, which shines brighter than anything else about them. They are people who project a oneness with the world, who are filled with loving compassion and have a purpose of being in service to others, humble people who are truly awake. Leonard Cohen remarks that saints are those who have connected with that energy of love which results in a kind of balance in the chaos of existence. The saint doesn't dissolve the chaos but instead rides the drifts and valleys of life like an escaped ski. His course is a caress of the hill; her track is the drawing of the snow in (tandem) with wind and rock. Something inside him so loves the world that the saint gives one's self to the laws of gravity and chance maintaining balance as she goes. Only God knows who they are, therefore, the point is to never take anyone for granted because you might be encountering a holy one, in fact, I would assert the odds are pretty high.

Our scripture seems to indicate that these holy ones are those who have come out of a great ordeal, have been cleansed of their struggles, and now spend their days in ceaseless praise to God. As I listen to some of the amazing stories of COVID survivors, I occasionally hear saint-like stories, not because of what the survivors did, but what has been done in their lives through God's handkerchiefs like medical professionals, researchers, and tireless prayer ambassadors. Their lives have gone from tribulation to transformation all because of what God is doing. Somebody once said that "God is like Elvis, You'll see him everywhere." If that is true, then I believe Barbara Brown Taylor nailed it when she indicated that to be a saint, you don't have to be famous, or perfect, or dead – you just have to be you – the one-of-a-kind, never-to-be repeated human being whom God created you to be – to love as you are loved, to throw your arms around the world, to shine like the sun, and let God use you as God's handkerchief.

Almost no one in town knew Osceola McCarty of Hattiesburg, MS was a saint until a few years ago. She didn't look like one. She was just a laundress, an old black woman who had never married, dropping out of school when she was in 6th grade to begin a lifetime of washing clothes. That was the year her maiden aunt came out of the hospital, unable to walk, and moved in with her family. Twelve-year-old McCarty left school to care for her and to help her mother and grandmother with the backyard laundry business. By the time her aunt recovered a year later, McCarty thought she was too far behind to return to school. "I was too big," she says, "so I kept on working." For the next 75 years that is what she did, scrubbing the dark clothes on the washboard and boiling the whites in a big black pot in her backyard before hanging them all out on the line to dry. Her day started when the sun came up and stopped when it went down, and it was not until she was 87 years old that anyone knew fully who she was. That was the year she gave \$150,000 – her life savings – to the University of Southern Mississippi for black scholarships. All of a sudden, photographers and reporters were crawling all over her, local business people pledged to match her gift, and the young woman who was awarded the first McCarty scholarship all but adopted her. McCarty says the one question she gets asked more than any other is why she did not spend the money on herself. She answers with the slyest of smiles, "I am spending it on myself," ...just one more of God's handkerchiefs at work in our world.

On All Saints Sunday, we make the very bold claim that the same blood that runs through Osceola, Mother Teresa, Thich Naht Hahn, Gandhi, Mandela... or Noor, the lady spy, runs through our veins as well, that same light we see shining in them shines in us too. They are our relatives and today we glance through the family album to remember where we came

from and to whom we belong. The book of Revelation is a mystical and illuminating vision of that family album which, despite rumors to the contrary, makes it clear that we don't know how our family story will end, but God promises that the Lamb Shepherd will help us see that path to the springs of life, where there is no more hunger or thirst or scorching heat. Death is not the end – in the end God will make an end of death itself and the last word will be the word of life. Can you picture it now? God welcoming one after another of God's saints, those handkerchiefs who have wiped the eyes of others and now it is God wiping the tears from their eyes, pulling them close in a bone-breaking hug, ushering them into a fuller kinship of love than ever imagined before – all those named this day and all who are loved by God! One big family reunion – let the saints go marching in! Thanks be to God!