

## All Saints Sunday

7 November 2010

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Ascension Lutheran Church, Landover Hills, Maryland

## “The Great Immigration”

Revelations 7.9&10

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

Our text for this All Saints Sunday is Revelations 7.9&10

<sup>9</sup>After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. <sup>10</sup>They cried out in a loud voice, saying, “Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!”

Just 3 weeks ago we held a memorial service in this Sanctuary for Bose Osho’s father Johnson Osho. Chief Osho had passed away recently in Nigeria, and Bose and her family were not able to return to Nigeria for his funeral. We held a wonderful celebration of his life here, and thanked God for his victory in Christ.

As I prepared for that memorial service, it struck me how the Bible is full of stories about immigrants. Abraham was an immigrant. God said to Abraham, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.” Abraham immigrated from Haran to Canaan.

The Old Testament lesson that we read in worship the Sunday of Chief Osho’s memorial service was the story of Ruth. Ruth lived in Moab. She married into a family that immigrated there from Judea. When her father-in-law died and her husband died, she immigrated with her mother-in-law to Judea. And you will remember from the story that things went well for her there.

The Israelites were an immigrant nation. It was during a period of 400 years of slavery in Egypt that the family of Jacob became the nation of Israel. And when they were freed from slavery the entire nation immigrated from the land of their bondage to the land God had promised to Abraham. The Israelites were born as an immigrant people.

On and on – there are many more stories of immigrants in the Bible, up to and including Jesus who was born to parents who had to immigrate from Galilee to Judea.

So the Bible is full of stories about immigrants. But few of those stories talk about how hard it is to be an immigrant. Few relate how hard it is to leave the familiar ways of a homeland and go to a place where you are separated from your family in the midst of strangers who may not greet you with open arms.

God said to Abraham, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.” The result is recorded in three simple words: “So Abraham went.” It doesn’t tell us how sad or upsetting or tearful the parting was. Did Terah’s heart break as he realized he might never see his son Abraham or his grandchildren again? Did his mom have to hide her tears as Abraham says goodbye and steps out into the unknown?

When St. Luke tells the story of Jesus' parents immigrating he simply says "Joseph went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee, to Judea, to the city of David." Sounds easy enough – until you consider that's over 100 miles and Mary was well into her pregnancy. If our Christmas cards get it right, that 100 miles over rough terrain on the back of a donkey on the verge of giving birth. Not an easy trip!

About the only story that touches on how hard immigrating can be is the story of Lot's wife. As she leaves her home she looks back the disaster falling out of the sky overtakes her, and she becomes a "pillar of salt".

If you are an immigrant you have to be careful about spending too much time looking back. It's good to remember the homeland, and it's good to hang on to beloved customs. But there are also strange new customs you have to learn and maybe a strange new language to tackle. If you spend too much time looking back and don't learn some of those new ways, the life of an immigrant can plenty "salty".

All of us are the children of immigrants. All of our ancestors came here – by choice or by force – from somewhere else. Somewhere in your past there is an immigrant.

Even if you are a "native American", the human family did not originate in the Americas. Your ancestors immigrated here from Asia, and their ancestors immigrated there from Africa. We are all children of immigrants.

For some of us that happened so many generations ago that we may no longer think of ourselves as the children of immigrants, and may have lost touch with how hard it is to be an immigrant.

Bose and her family know how hard it is to immigrate. Coming here recently from Nigeria, it is a fresh, living experience for them. They know how hard it is to be separated from the people you love and who love you. And how very hard it is to have so much distance between you and them that you can't be there to help out in the time of illness or death.

But, whether you are an immigrant, or like me the grandchild of immigrants, or your immigrant ancestors came here so long ago you can't even *think* of yourself in those terms ... regardless ... there is on the horizon a great immigration we will all take part in.

It is the immigration referenced in our text: "After this I looked," St. John writes, "and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. <sup>10</sup>They cried out in a loud voice, saying, 'Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!'"

The scene is heaven. And the great, countless multitude robed in white are all the Saints. Everyone who has clothed him or herself in the righteousness of Christ. That's what a Saint is. Anyone and everyone who has taken off the filthy rags of sin and good intentions and good deeds and self-justifications, and have put on the righteousness of Christ that is offered to us as the free gift of God's grace. That's you ... and me ... and Chief Osho, and Lyn Owens and Trish Manuel and Dara Manuel Shackelford and everyone who by faith have put on the righteousness of Christ.

And notice in our text that heaven was not their native homeland. They are from “every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages.” We have immigrated there from this world of sin and pain and tears and death to that brighter shore where there is no more mourning or crying or pain, for all the things that have caused us crying and pain will have passed away.

You may not think of yourself as the child of immigrants and you may not even *like* the notion of people coming here with strange accents and taking all our jobs. But you ain’t getting into heaven unless you become an immigrant. Heaven is not your native land, and you have to immigrate to get there.

St. Paul wrote one of my favorite descriptions of that immigration in 1 Thessalonians 4.16-17: <sup>16</sup>The Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel’s call and with the sound of God’s trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. <sup>17</sup>Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever.

The last, great immigration has 3 “r”s. Not reading, ‘riting, and ‘rithmetic. This is a different 3 r’s.

St. Paul talks about a “return”. One day Jesus who ascended into heaven will return. “Return” is the first “r”.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> “r” is “resurrection”. When Jesus returns there will be a “resurrection”. All the saints who have departed and now rest in Christ will rise to life. New life. Life beyond sin and sickness and pain and suffering. Life beyond death.

And the 3<sup>rd</sup> “r” is “reunion”. After the resurrection all of us who rise to life in Christ – all the Saints – will be reunited. “We will be caught up in the clouds together to meet the Lord,” St. Paul told the Thessalonians.

My grandparents immigrated here from Sweden. About 25 years ago my grandmother passed away. I took a train up to Connecticut for her funeral services. The family gathered at my aunt’s house, and just as it was time to leave for the church, my grandfather announced he was not going to the service. I volunteered to stay with him. When we were alone, he began to weep. “What’s wrong, grandpa?” “I will never see Caroline again”. My grandfather had a strong Christian faith and believed that Jesus would return and the dead in Christ would rise to life. But somehow he was never taught that 3<sup>rd</sup> “r”: reunion. He believed we would spend eternity in heaven with Christ, but that we would not recognize or know one another. I read him that passage from Thessalonians: “We will be caught up in the clouds together to meet the Lord,” and the idea of “reunion” comforted him.

If your family is in California or Nigeria, the distance between here and there may seem great. The distance between the living and the dead seems even *greater*. At the death of a loved one we sometimes say in our grief “Oh, I will never see them again.”

But for us – the Saints – the separation is temporary. Christ shall return, the dead in Christ shall rise, and all the Saints will be reunited.

Return, resurrection, and reunion: they make up the great, final immigration of God’s people from this world to the next. The only passport you will need is faith in Christ. The only visa you will need you were given when you were baptized.

The great, final immigration: Oh Lord, I want to be in that number!