



## All Saints' Day (A)

### Believing in Hope

[RCL] Revelation 7:9-17; Psalm 34:1-10, 22; 1 John 3:1-3; Matthew 5:1-12

Remember what happened in 2016? No, not that.

The Cubs won the World Series.

Dr. Thomas G. Long, preaching professor at the Candler School of Theology at Emory University, loves to describe the complexities of Biblical studies and church life through baseball. He puts it something like this:

Imagine a baseball game. Bottom of the seventh inning. One out. Runner on first. Score tied. The batter steps into the right-handed batter's box, about a few inches closer than the last time so that he can better adjust to the right-handed pitcher's nasty curve ball, which struck him out the last time. The pitcher notices this and shakes off the catcher's first suggestion of a curve ball. The catcher then calls a fastball, inside. Glancing in to see the catcher's sign, the shortstop moves to his right, ready to cover the hole between short and third, ready to steal a hit, but also well aware that he will have to cover second on a ground ball to the right side. As he moves, he throws up one finger, then three fingers, behind his back to the left fielder, who begins to inch toward the left field line. The catcher finishes giving the sign, puts dirt on his right hand, and crouches, ready to throw out the runner if he goes. The pitcher glances at the runner over his shoulder once, again, takes his fastball grip, then fires. Outside. Ball one.

Somewhere in the stands, your friend sighs. "Nothing ever happens in baseball."

Indeed, sometimes nothing happens for 108 years. Baseball takes attention and dedication and devotion, but that longtime dedication reaped big rewards when the Cubs won the Series. One of the most touching parts of it all was watching people write in chalk on the brick walls of Wrigley Field. The messages began as messages of support, and the messages grew as someone helpfully placed boxes of chalk along the walls. "Go Cubs Go," one read. "Fly the W," read another one. Then someone wrote, "Wish you were here, Grandpa." And someone else wrote, "We miss you, Dad! Go Cubbies!" Still someone else: "Grandma, we know you're watching from the stands in heaven! We love you!"

There, standing on the edge of what they once thought was impossible, people wanted to look back and remember the people who had so loved their Cubs, but never lived to see their glory. The people who cheered, year after year, loss after loss.

And then, in November 2016, the once-buried, once-cursed Chicago Cubs finally won a World Series.

There's a lot of heartbreak in baseball, and progress happens slowly, so slowly. "Maybe we have the players to do it this year," we say. But if we don't, we say, "There's always next year." It's the kind of thing that people who don't like baseball just don't understand.

"Nothing ever happens in baseball."

Oh, but sometimes things do happen. And when they happen the way that they did for the Chicago Cubs in 2016, it is an emotional experience that brings the whole country to happy tears.

And we all remember those who came before, those who loved their team and kept hope alive for so long. The Cubs nation owed those who came before all the glory of that night — for teaching them to love their Cubbies, for teaching them the traditions, for helping the fans have hope every single spring that the cursed Chicago Cubs may finally do it *this* year. Without those who came before and experienced all those heartbreaks but kept believing, the 2016 World Series would have been impossible.

*"When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying: 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.'"*

Blessed are those who continue to believe, against all evidence, that their hope is not misplaced, for they will eventually win.

All Saints' is more than just remembering all those in the Church that have died. It is remembering those saints lovingly as the people who made our faith possible. Who kept believing in hope and resurrection and grace and Jesus and taught our grandparents, our parents, and then us to do the same. Those who kept hope alive for one more cycle that real peace is possible. And the church, which is always standing on the edge of this impossible dream of peace and reconciliation that only God can bring about, gives thanks for those people every single year.

Some of the saints have names to us — our mothers, grandfathers, fathers, grandmothers, aunts, uncles, siblings, spouses, loved ones, and dear friends.

They weren't perfect. Far from it. In fact, some of them may have done tremendous good *or* tremendous harm, and for most of them, the record was mixed. In truth, we are all both saint and sinner. Each of them, however, shaped the church into what we are today. Their smiles, their eyes, their voices stay with us because they shaped us. Even long after they die, the saints are with us.

Other saints we never had a chance to know. They are our ancestors — both those with whom we share DNA and our ancestors in faith. Some of those saints made it into the Bible, and some lived long after it was written. They are St. Peter and St. Anne, St. Lydia and St. Paul.

Today is the day that we remember and give thanks for them all. We speak and write their names and we look at photographs as we remember their faces. We think of our loved ones as part of the heavenly throng, gathered around Christ's table. For just a moment, today in the assembly, we imagine heaven and earth are joined.

No, they weren't perfect, but without them, none of this would be possible. They brought our faith and our church into being and they changed the world, but it took a long, long time, and now the work is ours. And we, like the fans at Wrigley in 2016, remember the saints who made where we are possible as we stand on the edge of the impossible — seemingly always, these days, between dread and hope.

We remember that our ancestors also lived through turmoil and lived through war and lived through division and hate and hunger. We remember that just as they did not solve all of humanity's problems, neither must we. We must simply, as the Cubs fans did all of those years, keep hope alive, faithfully, loyally, year after year.

At Wrigley Field in 2016, Danny Camacho balanced on the gates as his uncle, Maurice Vazquez, held him up as he tried to find a good place to write in chalk on the brick wall. Maurice explained what the pair were doing there. "We're here for my father, my nephew Danny's grandfather, an awesome Cubs fan. He's not with us any more, he's with the Good Lord, and he's why we're down here. To give [the Cubs] strength so they can win the World Series." Vazquez said. "I think this is a great thing for them so they can see the loyalty of the fans. And believe me, we're loyal!"<sup>1</sup>

We are here for our fathers, our grandfathers, our grandmothers and our mothers and our siblings and our friends. We're here for spouses and children. We're here for saints that we never got to know because they died centuries before we were born. We're here for them because they are the reason we are here today.

We again stand on the edge of the impossible, the edge of anxiety, remembering our loved ones in our past and hoping for the best in our futures, knowing that our loved ones are a part of that future, too, because they helped to build it, brick by brick, pitch by pitch, slowly. We're here to figure out what we can do and be together, as this assembly, and what God will do among us. Because after all, if anyone knows how to root for a team that'll break your heart, it's God. And God — God is loyal. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Maggie Hendricks, "My journey to Wrigley Field, where fans are chalking the names of their loved ones on the walls," USA Today, 2 November 2016, <http://ftw.usatoday.com/2016/11/my-journey-to-wrigley-field-where-fans-are-chalking-the-names-of-their-loved-ones-on-the-walls>