

All Saints Day Commemoration
November 3, 2013
Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown MD
Readings: Daniel 7: 1-3, 15-18; Psalm 149; Ephesians 1: 11-23; Luke 6:20-31

“I want to begin this book with a story,” writes John Lewis in his memoir, Walking with the Wind, “It’s a simple story, a true story, about a group of young children, a wood-frame house and a windstorm”. John Lewis would grow up to be a civil rights leader and congressman. But in this story from the prologue of this book, he was only four years old and the other children were his cousins — “about a dozen of them, all told — along with my older sister Ora and my brother Edward and Adolph. And me, John Robert... too young to understand there was a war going on over in Europe and out in the Pacific as well. ...The only world I knew was the one I stepped out into each morning a place of thick pine forests and white cotton fields and red clay roads winding around my family’s house in our little corner of Pike County, Alabama.”

We had just moved that spring onto some land my father had bought, the first land anyone in his family had ever owned — 110 acres of cotton and corn and peanut fields, along with an old but sturdy three bedroom house, a large house for that part of the county, the biggest place for miles around. It had a well in the front yard, and pecan trees out back, and muscadine grapevines growing wild in the woods all around us — *our* woods.

My father bought the property from a local white business man who lived in the nearby town of Troy. The total payment was \$300. Cash. That was every penny my father had to his name, money he had earned the way almost everyone we knew made what money they could in those days ---- by tenant farming. My father was a sharecropper, planting, raising, and picking the same crops that had been grown in that soil for hundreds of years by tribes like the Choctaws and the Chickasaws and the Creeks, Native Americans who were working this land long before the place was called Alabama, long before black and white men were anywhere to be seen in those parts.

Almost every neighbor we had in those woods was a sharecropper, and most of them were our relatives. Nearly every adult I knew was an aunt or an uncle, every child my first or second cousin. That included my uncle Rabbit and aunt Seneva and their children, who lived about a half mile or so up the road from us.

On that particular afternoon — it was a Saturday, I'm almost certain — about fifteen of us children were outside my aunt Seneva's house, playing in her dirt yard. The sky began clouding over, the wind started picking up, lightening flashed far off in the distance, and suddenly I wasn't thinking about playing anymore; I was terrified. I had already seen what lightning could do. I'd seen fields catch on fire after a hit to a haystack. I'd watched trees actually explode when a bolt of lightning stuck them, the sap inside rising to an instant boil, the trunk swelling until it burst its bark.

Lightning terrified me, and so did thunder. My mother used to gather us around her whenever we heard thunder and she'd tell us to hush, be still now, because God was doing his work. That was what thunder was, my mother said. It was the sound of God doing his work.

But my mother wasn't with us on this particular afternoon. Aunt Seneva was the only adult around, and as the sky blackened and the wind grew stronger, she herded us all inside.

Her house was not the biggest place around, and it seemed even smaller with so many children squeezed inside. Small and surprisingly quiet. All of the shouting and laughter that had been going on earlier, outside, had stopped. The wind was howling now, and the house was starting to shake. We were scared. Even Aunt Seneva was scared.

And then it got worse. Now the house was beginning to sway. The wood plank flooring beneath us began to bend. And then, a corner of the room started lifting up.

I couldn't believe what I was seeing. None of us could. This storm was actually pulling the house toward the sky. With us inside it.

That was when Aunt Seneva told us to clasp hands. Line up and hold hands, she

said, and we did as we were told. Then she had us walk as a group toward the corner of the room that was rising. From the kitchen to the front of the house we walked, the wind screaming outside, sheets of rain beating on the tin roof. Then we walked back in the other direction, as another end of the house began to lift.

And so it went, back and forth, fifteen children walking with the wind, holding that trembling house down with the weight of our small bodies.

More than half a century has passed since that day, and it has struck me more than once over those many years that our society is not unlike the children in that house, rocked again and again, by the winds of one storm or another, the walls around us seeming at times as if they might fly apart.

It seemed that way in the 1960s, at the height of the civil rights movement, when America itself felt as if it might burst at the seams ---- so much tension, so many storms. But the people of conscience never left the house. They never ran away. They stayed, they came together and they did the best they could, clasping hands and moving toward the corner of the house that was the weakest.

And the another corner would lift, and we would go there.

And eventually, inevitably, the storm would settle, and the house would still stand.

But we knew another storm could come, and we would have to do it all over again.

And we did.

And we still do, all of us. You and I.

Children holding hands, walking with the wind. That is America to me — not just the movement for civil rights but the endless struggle to respond with decency, dignity and sense of brotherhood to all the challenges that face us as a nation, as a whole.”¹

When I first heard that story, it struck me that each of our lives is not unlike the children in that house, rocked again and again, by the winds of one storm or another, the walls around us seeming at times as if they might fly apart as incomes and jobs are less

certainas technology seems to run us rather than we harness it...as families struggle to stay connected in the escalation of busyness... and as illness or death comes to those we love.

And then, it struck me that the church, at its best, is not unlike the children in that house, rocked again and again, by the winds of one storm or another, the walls around us seeming at times as if they might fly apart.... as members hurt and others die...as polls tell us most people believe in God but don't see what God has to do with everyday life...as politics has become a game for the powerful rather than governing for the good of all... and as we struggle to find ways to make the love, presence and grace of God real to our neighbors, world and ourselves.

Into our rocking lives and world, All Saints Day arrives to remind us that the power of heaven is in the house. The festival of All Saints tells us to remember that we do not stand alone against the winds that shake our lives or church. On this day we remember the faithful people of conscience and the people who loved us who never left the house. They never ran away. They stayed, they came together and they did the best they could, clasping hands and moving toward the corner of the house that was the weakest. And when the another corner would lift, they would go there. And eventually, inevitably, the storm would settle, and the house would still stand. But they knew another storm could come, and they would have to do it all over again. And they did. And they still do. We still do.

Through the power of Jesus, the cloud of witnesses who have moved into the longer side of eternal life, stand with us, holding our hands, holding us up, surrounding us with their love when we grow faint. We may not always be aware of the apostles, St. Francis, Albert Schweitzer, Mother Teresa in the room, facing the winds with us. We may not always be able to find comfort right now in knowing that Audrey, Joe, Louise, William, Margaret, Ed, Hank, O'Dell and Robert are still in the line of our joined hands, shifting to ground us in the winds of change or sorrow. But aware or not, comforted or not, through

Christ , we are united with the communion of saints we confess in our creeds and proclaim in this festival. We are forever joined in the love of God with the company of saints that includes all who have died, disciples throughout the world and us – children of God holding hands, ever wet with the waters and power of our baptism, walking with the winds that will not overcome the power of love and whose we are.

The saints HAVE come marching in and we ARE among their number. Make room in the pews, in our schools, offices and homes... Make room in our hearts and lives for the power and vastness of the communion of saints, led by Jesus, empowered by the Spirit. They stand with us as we try day in and day out to respond with decency, dignity and grace to the challenges of being God's faithful people ---- caring for the poor, hungry, sorrowing and persecuted who Jesus blessed.... doing to others as we would have them do to us.... and living lives so that others may come to believe in the God who anchors our stormy lives and futures in hope and love. The saints ARE with us and we ARE among the saints.... participating in a story, a true story, about God's children, who hold hands in windstorms, moving to protect the weakest and hurting and bringing the kingdom of God closer. Amen.

Linda M Alessandri 11/2/13

ENDNOTE

1. John Lewis with Michael D'Orso Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement NY: Simon & Schuster, 1998 pp 11-13