

Sermon Preached by The Reverend Jonathon w. Jensen, *Rector*
Calvary Episcopal Church,
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
All Saints Sunday, November 6, 2016

Do you have a favorite saint? Usually, we think of saints as the paragons of the faith. That is true. Saints are also all the ordinary people who are faithful in their own time and place. A saint is anyone through whom you see the love or mercy or justice of God breaking into this world.

Still, there is value in looking to the paragons of faith as examples. For a long time, Mary was my favorite. She was an ordinary young woman who somehow found the grace to accept a role to help bring God's salvation into the world. As an instrument of grace, she displayed equal parts humility and boldness. I still love Mary, but now I have a new favorite.

Throughout the year, at the weekday services, we tell the stories of heroes of the faith. They are examples to which we can aspire and remember they are part of us as we are part of them. The Feast of All the Saints is set apart to celebrate all the heroes. Just as importantly on this day, we celebrate all the ordinary men and women and young people who were faithful in their own time and place. That's how the Bible uses the term. Every time the word "saint" appears in the Scriptures, it is in the plural form. It's a reminder we are all called to sainthood in our own way.

Today, I want to share the story of an ordinary person who has become my favorite saint. Through him, many people experienced the love, mercy, and justice of God breaking into this world. My favorite saint is not someone you will read about in any official books, not yet anyway. He's from much closer to home... Pittsburgh, in fact. It's not Fred Rogers, if you're thinking him, but Mister Rogers would certainly qualify. It's John Gillespie Magee. Not only is he from Pittsburgh, he grew up at Calvary Church.

John Magee was born in Pittsburgh in 1884. His parents were parishioners at Calvary with their son, John. They lived on Highland Avenue and attended Calvary in its former location, close to the Trader Joe's. He went off to Yale University and there opened the first men's shelter in New Haven. From there he went to seminary in Massachusetts. The dean of that seminary was George Hodges. George had been rector at Calvary when John grew up in this congregation. Hodges continually urged people at Calvary to put their faith into action. John did just that.

After seminary, he returned to Pittsburgh. While he was away at school, we built this magnificent, then new, building. One of the stained glass windows was given in honor of his mother. John was ordained here in 1911. That same year, a new hospital opened in Pittsburgh. It was established by his uncle in honor of John's grandmother. His uncle's house became the first building of the Magee Hospital for Women. It was to be open to all without respect to color or creed or previous condition. The whole family was faithful in their own time and place.

Clearly, John was from a family of significant means. He could have had a life of leisure. Instead, he decided to serve his far off neighbors and left for China to become a missionary after he was ordained. He spent the next thirty years there working with the poorest residents, building a school and a chapel.

While in China, he met a missionary from England, appropriately named Faith, to whom he was married. They had four boys. One of them (John Jr.), later flew for the Royal Canadian Air Force

and was killed in a training accident. Just before his death, he wrote the famous aviation poem, *High Flight*. It concludes with the line “Put out my hand, and touched the face of God.”

In 1937, while Magee was serving in China, the Japanese army invaded the country. He was stationed in Nanking which was then a city of 1 million people and the capital of the country. John refused to leave the city or its people. The invading army killed men, women, and children. On their approach to Nanking, John Magee and a group of about a dozen people appealed directly to the Japanese army to create a safe zone around the churches and American consulate. They had no authority to do so but their faith that was both humble and bold. An international safety zone of about two square miles was created protecting all the Chinese people within the zone. That’s about twice the size of the Highland Park neighborhood. While this was happening, the invading army brutally raped, tortured, and killed over 300,000 people.

John Magee had an early home movie camera. He recorded many of the atrocities at his own peril. He also became the local head of the Red Cross helping people to hospital and documenting the events. The film was later smuggled out of China. The images were printed in Life magazine with an anonymous report in Readers Digest, written by John. The footage was later used in a documentary film with representatives from China visiting Calvary Church.

More important than all of that, John Magee and the others left the protected area and helped over 250,000 Chinese people into the safe zone, about twice the size of Highland Park. 300,000 people died but they saved over 250,000 people from certain death and documented it.

When that part of the war was ending in 1940, John left China and moved to Washington, DC where he worked as an assistant priest at St. John’s Church in Lafayette Square, across from the White House. He served at the funeral of President Franklin Roosevelt and became chaplain to President Harry Truman. After the War, he traveled to Tokyo to testify at the War Crimes Tribunal and then became chaplain at his Alma Mater, Yale. In 1949, John came home to serve as assistant priest at Calvary Church in Pittsburgh. He died here in 1953 at age 69.

John Magee was one of us, from Pittsburgh and Calvary Church and a saint. He was an ordinary person who did extraordinary things. I’m pretty sure he would never be elected as president – but with equal parts of humility and boldness he became a saint. He was faithful in his own time and place. We will not save thousands of people from death. But... will *one* person experience the love or mercy or justice of God through you?

High Flight

Oh! I have slipped the surly bonds of earth,
And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings;
Sunward I've climbed, and joined the tumbling mirth
Of sun-split clouds, – and done a hundred things
You have not dreamed of – Wheeled and soared and swung
High in the sunlit silence. Hov'ring there
I've chased the shouting wind along, and flung
My eager craft through footless halls of air...
Up, up the long, delirious, burning blue
I've topped the wind-swept heights with easy grace
Where never lark or even eagle flew –
And, while with silent lifting mind I've trod
The high untrespassed sanctity of space,
Put out my hand, and touched the face of God.

High Flight was composed by Pilot Officer John Gillespie Magee, Jr., an American serving with the Royal Canadian Air Force. He was born in Shanghai, China in 1922, the son of missionary parents, the Reverend and Mrs. John Gillespie Magee; his father was an American and his mother was originally a British citizen.

He came to the U.S. in 1939 and earned a scholarship to Yale, but in September 1940 he enlisted in the RCAF and was graduated as a pilot. He was sent to England for combat duty in July 1941.

In August or September 1941, Pilot Officer Magee composed High Flight and sent a copy to his parents. Several months later, on December 11, 1941 his Spitfire collided with another plane over England and Magee, only 19 years of age, crashed to his death. His remains are buried in the churchyard cemetery at Scopwick, Lincolnshire.