

All Saints Day Devotional: The Other Side of the River

(Revelation 21:1-7) A true story about a young man who made a radical decision to swim across the Amazon River to his friends at a leper colony, while they wildly cheered him on. A beautiful metaphor of crossing the river of death to the other side of eternal life.

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Revelation 21:1-7

Way back in 1952, two young men from Argentina took a road trip through Latin America. One of the young men, later known as Che Guevara, went on to become a controversial revolutionary political leader. However, when this trip occurred, he was just a typical young man searching for adventure.

The two young men traveled through Argentina, Chile, Peru, Columbia, and Venezuela. One of the young men was a medical student, preparing to be a doctor. The other young man was a biochemistry student, preparing to be a pharmacist. They originally planned for their road trip to last about three months. But, in the end, it took about nine months, and was full of great adventures. One of the places they stopped at during their journey was a leper colony. Because of their medical training, they were extremely interested in caring for leprosy patients. So, for many weeks, they worked as volunteers at the colony. The lepers were no longer contagious, but they still carried the wounds of their old leprosy. The colony was located on the Amazon River. On one side of the river lived the lepers. On the other side of the river lived the staff who helped them—nuns and doctors and social workers. The river was a huge barrier between the two groups, with the healthy staff living on one side of the river, and the lepers living on the other side of the river. Although the two groups mixed during the day, they were completely separated at night.

The two young men developed a strong bond with the people who lived in the leper colony. They related to the lepers as equals, and treated them with dignity and compassion. For example, the nuns would not touch the lepers without wearing rubber gloves. But these two young men refused the gloves, believing they put an unnecessary and artificial barrier between the lepers and the staff. These two young men helped the lepers with medical care. But they also helped them repair their homes, they played soccer with them, they ate meals with them, they sang songs with them, and they swapped jokes and stories with them. The two men grew to love the people in the leper colony, and the lepers grew to love them.

After many weeks, it was time for these young men to leave the leper colony. They needed to complete their journey, and they needed to return to school. The night before their departure, the staff threw a party for them. They ate and drank and exchanged toasts and had a dance. During the party, one of the young men walked outside. He could see lights from the other side of the river where the lepers lived. As he looked across the river, he realized that he wanted to see them one more time before leaving the next morning. So he decided to cross the river and spend the night with his friends and say goodbye. He looked for the boat that the staff used to cross the river, but it was nowhere to be found. So he made a radical decision. He decided to swim across the Amazon River to where the lepers lived.

As he took off his shoes and shirt, his traveling companion and dear friend just about had a fit. He said, "You can't swim across the river! You'll drown in the currents. And if you don't drown, you'll get eaten by an alligator!" But the young man had made up his mind. He dove in and began the long swim across the river. By now a crowd had gathered on the staff side of the river. The doctors and nurses and nuns watched in horror as the young man took began his dangerous swim across the river. They were all shouting, "No, don't go! It's too dangerous! Come back! Don't do it!" But nothing could stop him. He kept swimming, in spite of the currents and the creatures of the water. By now, the lepers on the other side of the river could hear all the commotion. So they walked out to the river bank on their side of the river. Within a few minutes, they realized what was happening. Their dear friend was swimming toward them. Well, they got all excited. They began to shout, "Come on! You can make it! It's not much further! You can do it!" When their friend got close to their side of the river, they jumped in and pulled him to shore. When he had made it safely across, the lepers erupted into shouts of joy and celebration. It was an incredible moment.

That story reminds me of All Saint's Day. What happened on that river that night is similar to what happens when we lose a loved one to death. Those of us on this side of the river of death say to our dying loved one, "Don't go! It's too dangerous! We're not ready to lose you! Come back to us!" It's normal to feel that way. It's hard to watch someone we love swim across the river of death. But on the other side of the river of death, the saints of God are shouting, "Come on! You can make it! You're almost here!" And when our loved one gets to the other side of the river, all the saints of heaven shout with joy and celebration and hug and greet them and say "Welcome home!"

When this true story was made into a movie, as the young man swam across the river, a song played in the background. The title of the song is, "The Other Side of the River." Throughout the song, a phrase is repeated over and over again. It says, "I believe that I have seen a light on the other side of the river."

On All Saints Day, we affirm that we have seen a light on the other side of the river. The light is dim from our side. We can't see it very well. But in the distance, we can see a glimmer and flicker of light on the other side of the river of death. That light of course, is the great hope of eternal life. It's the hope we read about earlier in Revelation 21. That passage of scripture says that on the other side of the river, God wipes away all tears, and there is no longer any pain or suffering or death or tears or mourning. On the other side of the river is God. And, on the other side of the river are the Saints of God.

Many years ago, a hymn was written about the other side of the river. It's called "On Jordan's Stormy Banks I Stand." You can find it on page 724 of our hymnal. Please stand and let's sing about the hope we have of life on the other side of the river.