So here is a little trivia and maybe you already know it since you’ve been listening to me for over seven years and I am running out of material. Today is Halloween and that name comes from a contraction of the words “All Hallows Evening.” Hallow in this context means saints. Meaning that Halloween is the evening of All Saints Day. And as you probably also know it is okay in the church rule book to celebrate a feast day the day before it actually occurs. That is what the Christmas Eve is. If you look through the Prayer Book you will see that there is actually no such thing as a Christmas Eve service. What we have instead is major feast day, in this case Christmas Day and we celebrate it the night before. So, the idea of remembering All Saints on Halloween makes complete sense because that is what the name is really telling us to do. Now, with that fun and excitement out of the way let’s do a little talking about the nature of All Saints.

It is a pretty straight forward day, at least in terms of its name. But even with the clarity of name there are still probably a few questions about the specifics of the words used. We know that we remember the saints and we know how many – all of them, but that still leaves a bit of a question about who exactly the saints are. There is an old evangelical trick where individuals will do a sort of Jaques Derrida deconstructionalist literary criticism thing and try to strip away all the layers of meaning of the word saint and get back to its original meaning. To do this they say that when Paul wrote to the various churches in the Roman Empire, he would refer to everyone at those churches as saints – good people, bad people, the nice, the mean, the gossips and even the David Hasselhoff fans are all called saints. So, the argument goes that since Paul called everyone a saint then All Saints is about all of us. But honestly, such a conception makes for a pretty lousy Holy Day, it is kind of the participation trophy of the Christian life. In this version All Saints is like when Oprah Winfrey was handing out cars back in the early 2000’s – you get to be a saint and you get to be a saint and everybody gets to be a saint. Call me old-fashioned but I kind of like my saints to be a little more exciting than….well…me. I want my saints to be like Saint Denis who after having been decapitated walked around carrying his severed head preaching the Gospel. Sometimes I wonder if people find Christianity boring because we have made it boring. I mean if all I have to do to be saint is show up sometimes on Sunday mornings then who really cares. Groucho Marx famously said that he would not want to be the member of any club that would have someone like him as a member. That is kind of where I am with the everyone is a saint crowd. I mean how exciting can it be if Justin Bieber is a saint. So today as we remember All Saints let it be aspirational. Let us think of the heroes of the faith – the ones who sang hymns of praise while being devoured by lions and mauled by angry livestock. Let us remember the ones who preferred being burned at the stake to renouncing their faith. Not the ones who happened to remember to set their alarm clock on Sunday morning and made it in time for most of church. Not that I am against showing up for church, but saints should inspire us to reach a little higher. As Robert Browning tells us, “A man's reach should exceed his grasp, Or what's a heaven for?” So, let’s celebrate a few saints this morning – the exciting ones, not the ones in the fat part of the curve. And before I go on with a couple of stories, I know that some of the killjoys of our modern times will say these things may not have actually happened but they can put a cork in it while we celebrate the great saints that have come before.

The first saint I want to look at is St. Catherine of Alexandria who lived in the fourth century in Alexandria, Egypt (but I think you figured that out). She came from a noble family and was exceedingly beautiful and exceedingly intelligent. When she was just 18, she challenged the emperor, who was not Christian, about his lack of ascent to the Christian faith. To shut her up he brought in 50 philosophers to debate with her about Christianity in the hopes that their erudition would show her just how wrong she was. But Catherine was so articulate and persuasive that she converted all 50 of the philosophers and the emperor’s wife for good measure. The emperor was not converted but was very impressed with her and to show how impressed he was he ordered Catherine to become his mistress. She refused and so the emperor had her tortured on a spiked wheel. But this plan did not go so well because the wheel miraculously fell apart. Frustrated that his fiendish plot had unraveled, the emperor ordered her to be beheaded – which unfortunately was successful. But this would not be the end of Catherine. She shows up again in the fifteenth century when she was one of the voices that Saint Joan of Arc heard telling her to rescue France from the English. And as you know Joan then led the French army to defeat the English in the Battle of Orleans. But later the English burned her as a witch, but anyway onto the next saint.

Since we are Anglican, we should probably take a look at the Patron Saint of England, St. George. He was born sometime in the third century to Greek parents of Christian origin. He was a soldier in the Roman Army and served as a member of the Praetorian Guard for the Emperor Diocletian but because it was the style in those days, he was sentenced to death for refusing to recant his Christian faith. But that is not the exciting part of the story. The most exciting part of the story takes place before he was sentenced to death and it has to do with what he did with a dragon. The story goes like this. In the Libyan city of Silene an enormous dragon had taken up residence in a nearby swamp and, being a dragon, it had devoured all of the local’s flocks and herds. Having not managed his food supply very well the dragon then demanded two children a day from the villagers to satiate his appetite. The villagers agreed to the plan and to show no favoritism the children were picked by drawing lots and one day the lot fell upon the king’s daughter. The king was distraught and being a politician, he tried to explain why this whole lots business did not really apply to him and his daughter, but the princess would have none of it. She bravely said that she would die for her people. And so she was put out of the town and the gates were closed. As she was making her way toward the dragon St. George happened to ride by. He asked her what she was doing and she told him the story, urging him to leave so that he might be safe. George refused and set about after the dragon. They fought a fearsome battle and when George had gained the upper hand, he borrowed the princess’s girdle and bound the dragon. Now bound, the dragon’s self-esteem plummeted and he followed them about like a dog. George and the princess returned to the village with the dragon in tow. The grateful villagers and king gave George a vast amount of treasure but he did not take it. Rather he distributed it to the sick and needy.

So there you go, two great saints for the price of one. Hopefully none of us will have to endure what many of the great saints have, but we still have to endure many things. The saints inspire us to not take the easy way and they remind us that there is something greater to which we are to strive. There is a higher calling on our lives than what may be convenient or expedient at the time. The saints remind us to reach upward toward God so that we may be his, this day and forevermore.