

Celebrating St. Christopher at St. Christopher's Episcopal Church, Kailua, Hawaii
July 29, 2012 ~ The Rev. Giovan King

As I was reading and re-reading all of the many stories and legends about St. Christopher this week, I had what I considered, at the time, a great idea for a St. Christopher's Church advertizing campaign. If only Hawaii allowed such a thing. Some of you are familiar with the old series of billboards that used to appear on Route 66, in particular those going through New Mexico and Arizona, where you used to get your kicks.

Here's my idea. Picture it: as you are coming over the Pali toward Kailua: the first billboard you see reads: "Who was St. Christopher?" The second billboard: "Was he a giant with the head of a dog?" That one could have an artist's rendering of that scary character. The third billboard: "Was he the patron saint of travelers?" That would certainly be appropriate viewing for those on the road. Perhaps that sign would also say, "You are now 1.2 miles mauka from St. Christopher's Episcopal Church." Oh, and how about this for another billboard: "Was he a demoted saint?" Maybe that one could have a sad face on it. The final sign would let you know that all of the former descriptions about St Christopher are true...and it would also give our address, phone number, website, and the times of our service.

I'm going to pause here, by the way, to welcome our visitors. I know that many of you are traveling this summer. May our own St. Christopher guide and protect you on your journey. I also want you to know that we take our Bible and our faith seriously, and that I almost always preach on scripture. Well, there are *no* Scripture readings for the Feast Day of St. Christopher because there *is* no Feast Day of St. Christopher, though it used to be July 25th. More on that later.

As for the readings for this ninth Sunday after Pentecost: with regard to the Old Testament reading, the "short of it" is that David was a flawed individual, but the best thing about him could be observed when the prophet Nathan confronted him about this sin that John read about today. David confessed to God, in the beautiful Psalm 51, for God to cleanse him, and create in him a new heart. We are to pray that prayer as well. Over and over again, every time we mess up, which we of course frequently do.

Two takeaways from today's Gospel: if we will just share the many baskets full of the gifts we have been given by the Lord, none of us will ever hunger or have need of anything; and, if we just follow the Lord Jesus across every sea that rages in our lives, he will always show us the stones upon which we may plant our feet, and we, too, will walk over those seas safely.

Now, back to St. Christopher. You may recall the story about him making his way across a sea – a river actually- with the Christ-child on his back. Or, so they say. If some kid hadn't turned in that story in a creative writing class in monastery school in the 13th century, we might still be celebrating St. Christopher's feast day. But, in 1969, the Catholic Church decided that this famous story, and other stories about many more saints, were more legend than fact. And, so, St. Christopher (and others, he was in good saintly company) – St Christopher fell on hard times, was demoted, and his name was no longer picked for any new church start-ups after that.

Have you ever signed up for a club, a team, a school course or similar and showed up the first day and told your name was not on the list? You signed up. You know you did. But, somehow your name disappeared. Maybe your situation was eventually resolved and you were returned to the list. Not so with our St. Christopher. Technically, actually, he was not really demoted. But, he was definitely taken off the calendar for feast days.

I am told that our parish probably had never celebrated the no-longer Feast Day of our patron St. Christopher before we celebrated it last year. Not even before 1969, when he fell from grace. When I asked last year what people knew about him, many of you gave snippets of the famous story illustrated on our banner, and on this icon. That he was a giant. That he carried people across the river. That he carried the Christ child across the river. Then, one parishioner from the first service, who will (probably) remain nameless, called out, "And he probably didn't exist."

Well, there actually *does* seem to be some evidence that a man named Christopher, who died as a Christian martyr, *did* live in the late third and early fourth century. That Christopher is said to have been from what is now present day Libya and when Romans overran that area, it is recorded in history books that this Christopher was forced to travel back to Rome with the army, and forced to enter the Roman army himself, as a personal officer to Emperor Diocletian. Among the thousands of Christians that Emperor Diocletian persecuted

and killed was a man we now know as St. George. According to *this* story about St. Christopher, after witnessing the killing of George, Christopher stepped up to the plate and publicly declared himself a Christian. Of course, it was at that time that he, too, died as a martyr to the faith.

Some scholars, including historian David Woods, have proposed that the person identified in the west as St. Christopher may in fact have been the Egyptian martyr Saint Menas. They are both described as belonging to the Third Valerian Cohort of the Marmantae, a military unit of Northern Africa of Marmarica (between modern day Libya and Egypt), and both are identified with the Emperor Diocletian. They are both said to have been martyred in Antioch, best known to us as the place where followers of Jesus were first known as Christians. It is further suggested that since Menas was not a native of that land, his name was unknown and so after his death he was simply remembered as *Christophoros* or “Christ bearer.” St. Menas happens to be the patron of travelers in the Coptic tradition, just as St. Christopher is the patron saint of travelers in the Western world. It is particularly appropriate to celebrate a patron saint of travelers at this time of year, when so many parishioners and non-parishioners are traveling. I have learned, by the way, that some of our sister St. Christopher’s churches have automobile blessings on this Sunday, and if you read our e-mail blast this week, you know that I stand willing to bless your car, or bike, or skateboard, or canoe, or whatever you used to transport yourself to church today.

It is also particularly appropriate to remember St. Christopher *this* year, the year of the London Olympics, as he is also the patron saint of athletes. I suspect that we, St. Christopher’s Church, received our name because St. Christopher is also known as the patron saint of sailors. I trust that it is not because he is the patron saint of toothaches, although you might keep that in mind the next time you have one.

In re-reading the famous legend of St. Christopher we all know, of him carrying Christ on his shoulders across a raging river, I was reminded that he came to do that because he was seeking to serve the greatest king around. And it was a hermit who lived by the river that introduced him to Christ and opened his eyes to see that *Christ* was the greatest King, the one to serve. The legend continues that when Christopher asked the hermit how he could serve Christ, the hermit first suggested fasting and prayer. Christopher replied that he was unable to perform that service. (Hmm. The human side of the Saint.) It was then that the hermit suggested that because of his size and strength Christopher could best serve Christ by assisting people to cross the dangerous river, in which many were perishing as they attempted the crossing on their own. The hermit promised that this service would be pleasing to Christ. And so, Christopher not only carried Christ across the river, but also helped many others cross that river safely. One could say that he carried Christ across that river not only once, but every time he helped someone.

Christopher used his unique gifts to bear Christ and others. That story may be, and almost certainly is, a legend. But we, we at St. Christopher’s church in particular, in a unique way, are called to make that story more than a legend. We are to live into that story. *We* are St. Christopher. *We* are the ones called to bear Christ to our community and to the world. Amen.