



**All the Best Podcast**

***Episode 90. Humbly and Quietly Faithful***

***90. Featuring Reverend Russ Levenson, Rector of St. Martin's Episcopal Church***

Rev. Russ Levenson: The 8th of April 2013. Mr President, it's early on Monday morning, and I finished up my remarks for Ellie's memorial service, but as I have been doing so, I've been thinking a lot about your question the other day when we were at the house: "What do you think heaven is like?" As you know, there have been a lot of books in the last few years written about near-death experiences in which, thanks to modern medicine, I guess, people have actually died and had a wide variety of experiences. A feeling of peace and tranquility, seeing a great and welcoming light, being greeted by loved ones who have gone before, being greeted by The Lord. All of these, of course, are encouraging to me. The short version is that I believe the Gospels testify that life after death is real, not some kind of mystical netherworld where we get wings and play harps, but that we will be in the presence of our loved ones, one another, and where we will likely continue in some sort of service beyond ourselves in God's everlasting kingdom. I do not know exactly what life will be like, but when I was in my mother's womb, I really did not know what this life was going to be like, and it turned out pretty good. I can only imagine when we pass from this one to the next, it will be even more than we can ask or can imagine. Yes, whether or not you would see Robin and how old she would be. Good questions. I really don't know the answer to that age question, but I do believe you will be greeted by her, by your mother and father and friends and loved ones just waiting for you. You know, because I've told you many times what

an honor it is to be your priest, and what a blessing it has been to grow as friends with you and Barbara for now well over half a decade. You have shown us more hospitality than I could ever imagine. We've shared good laughs, good meals, good times here in College Station and in Maine, and I hope and pray there are many more to come. The last several months worried me so, but I'm glad to see your health improving day by day. We have, at your request, put away the harps and we have done so, I pray, for a long, long time. It is my hope and prayer that the 41st President will outlive his priest. But if our dear Lord decides to call you to our eternal home before me, please know that I would like to be with you in prayer and presence. And if he calls me first, I'll be there waiting for you with open arms, a fresh plate of oysters, and no broccoli. Love to you, my brother in Christ, Russ.

This is “All the Best”. The official podcasts of the George and Barbara Bush Foundation. I'm your host. Sam LeBlond, one of their many grandchildren. Here we celebrate the legacy of these two incredible Americans through friends, family, and the foundation. This is “All the Best”. On behalf of our family and the George and Barbara Bush Foundation, this is “All the Best”.

The Reverend Dr. Russell J. Levinson, Jr., began his tenure as rector of St. Martin's Episcopal Church in Houston, Texas, 14 years ago in 2007. Reverend Levenson was rector for George H.W. Bush and Barbara Bush for over a decade. President and Mrs. Bush were active members at St. Martin's for over 50 years and served in many roles of leadership and ministry. Reverend Levenson officiated and preached at the memorial service at St. Martin's for the First Lady of the United States, Barbara Pierce Bush. Later, in 2018, he co-officiated and preached at the state funeral for our 41st president, the Honorable George H.W. Bush at Washington National Cathedral and the Houston-based memorial service held at St. Martin's. We are thrilled to have Rev. Levinson with us today on All the Best. Reverend, great to see you.

Rev. Russ Levenson: It's good to be with you, Sam. I haven't seen you in a long time, and it's good to be with you for a happy reason, and I'm doing quite well.

Sam LeBlond: Well, that's good to hear. And you know, George and Barbara Bush's faith is frankly an underappreciated part of their story, and we couldn't think of a better person to help us understand just how important it was to them than the rector at their home parish, in which they were active members for over 50 years. So before we talk about your time at St. Martin's with the former president and First Lady, Reverend, I would love to hear about your journey. What were some of

your stops on the way to Houston, Texas? And was there someone or something that inspired you to serve the Lord?

Rev. Russ Levenson: I lived in a lot of places, and when I came to St. Martin's, I had to assure people that I was not outrunning the law or reputation, but I was born and raised in Alabama. I went to a small college in Birmingham, Birmingham Southern College, where I met my future bride. I grew up in a retail family and really had that as an opportunity. But after working several summers in my father's retail store, I felt like that wasn't what I wanted to do and started to explore other vocations. I was involved in the church as a young man, came to faith, actually, in my late teen years. I grew up in the church, but really it became meaningful and purposeful in my life in my late teens. So it was always in the back of my mind, but I did not know this would be a vocation, the priesthood. But I went on to my wife and I married right out of college. We had two kids. We headed off to Virginia Theological Seminary. We were actually at the seminary right outside D.C. during the years of 1989 to 1992, a crucial time. Graduated from there, served at the University of South Suwannee, Tennessee, as a chaplain for a little bit, went back to Birmingham, the same parish I grew up in, for a few years and got my doctoral degree. Then we had our third child, Luke Levinson, who, I'm mentioning his name because he's a musician. He's on SoundCloud, and any time you listen to one of his songs, he gets a little money. I have two other wonderful children and I have grandchildren now. And then Laura and I were called to Lafayette, Louisiana, where I served for five years. And then after that, Pensacola, Florida, where I served for five before I was called Saint Martin's. So it's been a long journey. Lots of people had an influence on my life. One of the people who probably had the strongest influence outside of my father and people who reared me was a guy named John Claypool, who actually had a poignant moment with your grandfather. John lost a daughter to leukemia at the age of 10. He and the president happened to be at a luncheon together where the President was speaking, and I actually have the photograph of the two of them sitting right outside my office, having a little conversation at that meeting. And John was a mentor and friend to me for 20 years and sadly died in 2005, and I miss him very much. But he really did shape a lot of my ministry. And actually, he wrote a book called "Tracks of a Fellow Struggler" about the death of a child, and it was quite popular 20 or 30 years ago. They just republished it, and they came to me and asked me to write the foreword for that book, so it was quite an honor to step in that role.

Sam LeBlond: Wow. Well, all those stops along the way led you to where you currently are, St. Martin's in Houston, Texas, where you took on that very big task

of rector of the largest Episcopalian church in North America. You had two long-standing members of your new congregation, former President George and Barbara Bush. Can you talk about that time in your life and what, if any, role George and Barbara Bush played in helping with your new transition?

Rev. Russ Levenson: Yeah, that's a great question and easy to answer. So as I said, I was in Pensacola before we came here. Most of my family's east of the Mississippi. Frankly, Pensacola is a beautiful place. We were minutes away from the Gulf Coast. I could leave my office and be fishing in about 15 minutes, so we were reluctant about even exploring this position, but it's a call. And so we listened and prayed, and that's a lot longer story. Eventually, we were called by the search committee and the vestry here. I think somebody conveyed to your grandfather that they knew it would be tough for us to move. Unsolicited, I don't know, a couple of weeks after I accepted the call, my parents who lived in Birmingham, Alabama, and Laura's parents, my wife's parents who lived in a little small town in East Alabama, both got long handwritten letters from your grandfather. They said how happy they were that we were coming their way. There's no need to worry they would take care of us, and Houston is a great place, St. Martin's is a great church and they looked forward to meeting them. And then one day, this is back in 2007, not everybody had cell phones back then, and I was actually on my way out the door to a pastoral kind of crisis and the phone rang, and this is the old days, I pick up the phone and I looked and it said, Office of George Bush, and I thought, "OK, do I take this call or do I still go?" And I decided to take the call, and I suspected it would not have been a long conversation. Just it was him right away welcoming us and reached out in that way. And it wasn't long after that, I mean, we came in the fall after they finished their time in Maine. Within weeks, we were having our first meal out with him and the beginning of a wonderful friendship.

Sam LeBlond: Well, Reverend, I think it's safe to say that after 2007, you became fast friends with George and Barbara Bush spending plenty of time with them, praying with them during my grandfather's presidency. He was described as having a quiet faith embedded in him by his New England Episcopal Church upbringing. Reverend, you've observed him and had discussions with him about his faith over the years. How would you describe George Bush's relationship with God?

Rev. Russ Levenson: I'd say something about your grandmother's and your grandfather's. To me, one of my favorite books of his books is that All the Best book, all the letters and the journal entries, and you learn a lot about him through that and you learn that they were both churched. I mean, they grew up in the

church. I think they would both say neither of them had an epiphany moment where everything came. They just they were shaped by their church. And so as I read and in the conversations I had with both of them, that powerful moment he often referred to after being shut down and kind of floating there in the Pacific and being pulled out. The question that we've all heard him ask, "Why did God spare me?" And there have been a wide variety of answers, and I think toward the end of his life, he said, things like he spared me so I could be married to Barbara. I mean, that was and I think that is true. But I would push back and say, did he not spare you to do all the incredible things that you did and grow the incredible family, including a grandson like you, that he did both of them together? One of the pieces I read not too long ago, this is after they had married, and they were wondering whether or not he was going to go back to war in the Pacific and didn't know yet. But suddenly the war was over. There was victory, and he said everybody was out, you know, partying as they should be as they would be. But he and your grandmother, if you know the story that day, and I'm sure they had their party too, but together they went and sought and found a small church that was open, went inside by themselves and knelt and prayed together, giving thanks to God that the war was over and prayed for the nation. That's the kind of thing you saw and you saw it here again and again and again. I mean, it was a real faith. They talked very openly about confidence and life after death, but they wanted, as you know, meaning and purpose. And that's what life is for that call to service and call it a love call to care.

Sam LeBlond: Two of my grandfather's favorite Bible verses were Proverbs 27:2, "Let another man praise you and not your own lips." It's kind of our family credo. And Luke 12:48, "To whom much is given much shall be required." What do these two Bible verses teach us about the faith of George Bush?

Rev. Russ Levenson: Humility. It would be hard to win the humble contest. You know, if you're trying to be humble, then you probably lost the contest already. It just seemed to be part and parcel of who he was. I really do miss your grandparents, particularly those last two or three years. We were talking, if not every day, every three or four days, and had great conversations. In many ways, your family took our family in. And often when we would come to Maine, he would invite our children, and they very quickly felt like they had a great aunt and uncle. One night they had taken my whole family out to eat, all of us. We were in a back corner of a restaurant there in Maine, and the kids had gotten so comfortable with him that I think they had no idea who they were with. He's always very intent that they order dessert. And we'd had dessert and we're getting up and leaving. We



were upstairs, and in the meantime, the whole restaurant downstairs had filled up. I just could sense what was about to happen, and I pulled my wife back. I said, "Let's pull back." And as he walked downstairs with my children, one by one, everybody in the restaurant started to stand up. And then the whole restaurant broke out in applause. And I wanted my kids to see, you know, that's not something he required or wanted. It was a powerful, poignant moment for my kids. They didn't grow up with him as their president, but they suddenly realized who he was, and that humility was incredible. The other piece he was given much. But Sam, as you know, he didn't have to go to war. He didn't have to be a navy pilot. He could have stayed in New England and followed in his father's footsteps. He broke out as a pioneer in Texas and started his own business and didn't have to run for office and get beat running for office and then try again. All these things that he did were a consistent "yes" to the opportunity to serve. The fruit of that, we're still blessed by today, not just our nation, our world.

Sam LeBlond: Well, as their rector for over a decade, you were able to spend a lot of personal and private time with both George and Barbara Bush. Most people know about George and Barbara Bush, the servants to our country, but many don't know George and Barbara Bush, the servants of God. Reverend, what can you tell us about that version of George and Barbara Bush?

Rev. Russ Levenson: What I came to experience with them, Sam, more and more, I think, was that we prayed together a lot, particularly in the last few years. That was at the hospital or at the house. Toward the end, I almost even saw to the end the last year or two, it was very hard for them to get to church. So I brought church to them. My wife and I would often go over to the house and have church for them. My practice was there's a long version of home communion and there's a short version. Your grandfather preferred the short version, which was fine with me. And so we would have a long talk and sometimes we'd eat lunch together, whatever. But we would always end by sharing communion, by holding hands. I think nobody expected Barbara to go first. I mean, I think that's probably something that surprised a lot of us. But whether it was he or she or both of them ill at the time, I would always anoint their head with oil and pray for them. You know, he had those big, beefy hands and he would always kind of grab hold of both my hands and thank me, and I would say more toward the end in tears and happy tears, but I mean, it was meaningful tears. So I think prayer became more important. The regular consumption of the Lord's Supper was important to them, being prayed for and having the freedom to talk about their faith.

Sam LeBlond: Reverend, you played an integral role during the funeral week for my grandfather and grandmother, co-officiating and offering a homily. I often go back and read all the wonderful tributes from that week, including yours. A part of your homily that I keep going back to is the gift that he gave you, as I believe it is a quintessential George Bush story. Can you please retell that story and what do you remember most from that week in 2018?

Rev. Russ Levenson: I thought you might ask about that, so I did bring that with me. I actually keep it at home now. I don't want anybody to take it off with it. Yeah, this was years before he was ill. I mean, you know, he was quite healthy and he gave me this little plaque made by a friend of his: "Preach Christ at all times. If necessary, use words." And I thought that's such a wonderful way of encapsulating who he was. You know, a lot of time and planning went into that. I had been here a few weeks when we had our first funeral meeting over at his office and the whole team, the whole Bush 41 team was there and he was in the office every day then, and he came walking through and said, "So you're at it again, you know, put away the harps. It's not going to happen any time soon." And he was right. That was twelve years before, eleven years before. But I think the important part about all of that is that we all knew it would be a service that we would remember. And I would say for both the services, both for Barbara and for the two services, the service in DC and service here in Houston, we knew there would be a lot that was lifted up about the incredible work both of them had done. But as an old-time Episcopalian, they wanted just the basic service. We knew it wasn't going to be a basic service. The week Barbara passed away, we did five funerals within 10 days of her death. And as I said to some people, "You know what? Those other four, they're going to look pretty much like Barbara's, except for the guest list." It was pretty much an old Episcopal service. If you can find it, right after the service in D.C., Tom Brokaw was doing something out front. He refers to the service and everybody is kind of talking about politics, and he goes, "Now, wait a minute, we need to remember what we just witnessed here. This was an old Episcopal service, but it was about faith. It was about hope." We were reminded in that scene that took place between Secretary Baker and your grandfather that I recounted and got permission before I told it. And he said about the importance of serving one another. And he said that's a distillation of a message we all need to hear right now. And he got choked up, he said. You know, we were living at a time when we need to hear that.

Sam LeBlond: Reverend, I am always learning lessons from my grandparents' amazing life, I still am, and I'm lucky enough to be able to share them here with

everyone listening. So I have to ask you, Reverend, was there something you learned from George and Barbara Bush that you could share with us today?

Rev. Russ Levenson: Gosh, I could talk for hours. I did not throw away any of my letters, and I have a very thick stack of letters, and I did not throw away any of the emails. Your grandmother became quite an emailer.

Sam LeBlond: She picked it up pretty quick.

Rev. Russ Levenson: Yeah, I mean, I got a few from your grandfather, but lots from your grandmother. I will say, I loved their humor. You know, humor shares the same root word as humility. It's an ability to look at yourself and take life lightly. If you remember, at your grandmother's funeral, I had this experience a few nights before she actually passed away when we actually all thought she was passing away. We were at the house. I recounted this in the funeral, but I said to Doro, I said, "Does she want me to come up?" So Doro goes up, comes back down. She said she wants to stay with dad. Your grandfather pointed at me and said, "No, I want you to go up and pray with her." And I said, "You're the president, so I'll go do that." And I went up and knocked on the door. And so here was the woman lying in great weakness, frankly. But I knock on the door and I said, "Barbara, it's Russ." And she goes, "I'm not checking out yet." And we had a great visit and we prayed and all that. One of my favorite stories, and I think I shared this with you before I came on of her humor is when we went over the house. I don't know if you ever got bit by her dog, Bibi, but most people did. It's a mark of a badge of courage. And we had been at the house. We were leaving, and my wife leaned over to, as she often did, to give your grandfather a kiss on the cheek and as she did Bibi just bit her right on the leg. Bit my wife in the leg, and I could see my wife kind of jolt, and she pulled back and Barbara goes, "Well, are you OK?" My wife said, "Yeah." So she goes, "I need to see what Bibi did." My wife kept saying, "No I, really I'm OK." She said, "And I've got to see." So my wife pulls up her pants leg, and as she does, blood's kind of running down her leg. And Barbara said something like, "Well, there you go. So sorry about it." But we left, and two days later, my wife was coming back from a walk at a nearby park and she saw a car pulling away from our house. She got up to the front door and there was a large orchid with a note, and we've still got the note and it said, "Dear Laura, I'm so sorry. You just look good enough to eat. Love Bibi."

Sam LeBlond: That's a classic Barbara Bush story.



Rev. Russ Levenson: I think their humor, one of the things that don't take anything too seriously. I think their sincerity, it was not something, as you pointed out, Sam, it was not something they wore on their sleeve. And I think we witness a time and you and I know this. So many people are using religion to further their political career. And I think your grandfather and your grandmother were frankly used by their faith to promote a common good and make the world a better place. I want to be that person. I pray for those kinds of leaders again. And I think faith, family, friends, there are three f's that they always talked about. They didn't just say that—they absolutely meant it. Those are lessons I go back to again and again. Their incredible hospitality. They were so generous with their lives, and I often when I'm reading about them, which I still do, I go, "There must have been three sets of them."

Sam LeBlond: Couple stunt doubles. Well, reverend, it's been truly an enlightening conversation, and thank you for being a part of All the Best and lending your expertise on the subject of faith and letting us in kind of behind the curtain of your friendship with George and Barbara Bush. I'd like to end by asking you for advice.

Rev. Russ Levenson: Go.

Sam LeBlond: Well, the world has had its fair share of difficult times in the past couple of years. Reverend, what advice would you have for someone who has trouble keeping their faith up during difficult times?

Rev. Russ Levenson: I can answer quickly because I'm asked this almost every day. Sam, I think one of things that troubles me right now, and I'm just speaking as a pastor. We've been out of church, we've been out of synagogue, we've been out of our mosques, we've been out of our houses of worship for almost two years. And we've also been shut up on our own, many people. I think one of the things that we need to do to kind of fight back the tide of darkness, depression, and angst right now is to be back with our faith communities. However we do that, whether you're wearing a mask or whether you're doing it virtually, but do not disconnect from your faith communities. And I would say one of the things I learned from your grandmother and grandfather, they were in church every week. If health or travel did not prevent it, they were here, and they were fed by that. I think many of our societal ills right now are the fruit of actually spiritual issues. So reconnecting with God, be in prayer, be with other people. When we get kind of turned in on ourselves, it's easy to kind of slip into those places of darkness. I'm actually quite hopeful about the future. I sense a tremendous spiritual hunger. We're actually

seeing numbers in certain areas of our church life that we've not seen in years in the way of participation. We've actually grown during the pandemic, and it's been fascinating to sit back and go, "How does that..." But I think it's that hunger. The easy answer is if you have that hunger, then look for ways to feed it. People in my business are going to say, return to your faith or turn to faith for the first time.

Sam LeBlond: Well, Reverend, thank you for being a part of the show, thank you for sharing your amazing stories about my grandparents, and thank you for all the great work you do for your congregation and the people of Houston.

Rev. Russ Levenson: Well, thank you. I'll just say serving as their priest and pastor and eventually becoming a friend, I think, was and remains one of the greatest privileges of my life, and my wife and I will always count it in that regard.

Sam LeBlond: Well, thank you. Thanks. I'm Sam LeBlond reminding you to listen, share and subscribe to all the best on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, and everywhere great podcasts are found. Thank you for joining me as we celebrate "All the Best".