

November 3, 2024

All Saints Sunday

Isaiah 25:6-9 (NRSV)

⁶On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear. ⁷And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever. ⁸Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken.

⁹It will be said on that day, lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.

Revelation 21:1-6 (NRSV)

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ²And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; ⁴he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away." ⁵And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." Also, he said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true." ⁶Then he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.

Holy Wisdom, Holy Word...

No More Tears

Sunday mornings were always chaotic in the house in which I grew up. Everything

was about getting ready for Sunday school and church, but it seemed sometimes that it would require a gargantuan effort to get there. The room that contained the stereo, the piano, and my dad's voluminous classical music collection was located directly across the hall from my room. About 7:30, dad would make his way from the kitchen where he had completed the Sunday crossword in the newspaper and would ascend the stairs to the music room where he would select one of the great sacred choral works of Bach or Haydn or Beethoven or Mozart. He would have his coffee mug in one hand and his conductor's baton in the other, deftly holding them in balance as he conducted whatever orchestra and chorus were featured on the album he chose. If it was something familiar to him, he would often lend his voice to the tenor section in full voice in unison with the sound emanating from the hi-fi, often in Latin or German. It gave him great joy to do this. For him, it was a sincere act of worship.

However, at the time, I didn't see it that way. As a teenager who desperately wanted to sleep in as late as possible, I would come out of the sheets with a shock when dad cranked up the music. Eyes blinking, adjusting to the morning light coming through the blinds, I would drag myself out of bed, open my bedroom door, and then give dad a dirty look as I made my way downstairs for a quick bowl of cereal in the kitchen. It never entered my thinking at the time that I would one day give anything to have those moments back.

The book of Revelation often makes most of us a bit nervous. From the very beginning, those who worked in putting together the Bible didn't know what to do with it. And when the New Testament came into its final form around the end of the Second Century AD, this book squeaked in by a hair! We're just not sure what to make of the wild images of the prophetic imagination evoked in this book. What are we to do with the violent and frightening images found herein? The dragon with seven heads, lakes of fire and sulfur and smoke, cosmic battles with voluminous amounts of bloodshed—the apocalypse in brilliant 3-D—darkness, danger, and doom! I will never forget the time in Sunday school when I was an early teen. Mr. Walt Schaffer, our teacher and ever the tease, had purchased the Bible on cassette, read by Charleston Heston. One time he made us listen to the Book of Revelation. He started the cassette and then turned off

the lights. I will never forget Heston's booming voice filled with Revelation's descriptions of doom and despair echoing in the dark! Needless to say, we were all scared out of our wits!

It is unfortunate that the book of Revelation has been used to justify all manner of things: revolution and counter-revolution, Christian Zionism, sectarian violence. It has fueled the fires of bigotry and fanaticism of all kinds. So why do we find ourselves confronted by Revelation, especially at the celebration of All Saints? The Church has widely observed the festival of All Saints continuously since about the year 600. Originally kept on May 13th, it was moved to November 1st around 735 AD and has remained there ever since. For centuries, All Saints has been a great feast day, a day often set aside for baptisms, where those being baptized are said to come to be part of the company of saints, adopted children of God destined to become citizens of a heavenly city, the New Jerusalem. It's also a day in which those who have died are remembered and honored, our kinship with them continuing as we join our voices with theirs in the great company of the saints in heaven.

But as we wade through the apocalyptic images of this odd and challenging book, we must remember its context. At its heart, Revelation is a book of hope and consolation, a vision of comfort for a people under persecution and distress. It's hard for us to imagine what persecution is like—a life lived in fear and trembling, always on the run, never sure about their survival. It's the kind of life that the Roman emperor Diocletian inflicted upon those early Christians who wrote and preserved this book. They were the first saints of the church, brothers and sisters in faith, risking all that they had for the sake of a name—the name of Christ, which they knew was above all other names, including that of the emperor himself. For Diocletian, what was at stake was a matter of state control over the masses. For Christians, what was at stake was control of their inmost identity. In putting on Christ in baptism, they had been made citizens of a heavenly city, a city not made by human hands, and could do no other than act in the name of the Christ for whom they themselves were named, the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.

We don't know much about the people living in those seven churches in Asia Minor with whom John of Patmos shared his vision. However, we can catch a glimpse of their doubts and their fears, their hopes and their dreams. What these people imagined was extraordinary! Most were former Jews who had converted to Christianity in a Roman-dominated world, members of a heretical wing of a minority faith barely tolerated by a brutal empire. Yet what they saw was a vision of universal humanity, a new heaven and a new earth, a holy city coming down out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. One can feel the hope welling up inside these persecuted faithful as they heard the cadence of these words build to climax. And notice that our text begins by describing this new heaven and earth by the things that were not going to be there.

The writer begins by saying "the sea was no more." It was the sea that separated the exiled John of Patmos from his beloved churches. If it weren't for the sea, he could be with them in person, a strong pastoral presence offering a personal word of encouragement and assurance during their struggle. The new world coming into being means the removal of all present barriers in human relationships; that which precluded the possibility of community would be erased. The sea also represented chaos. It was from the sea that the dragon arose to torment the earth. And, if we go back to Genesis, the first book in the Bible, we remember that it was from the dark, threatening waters at the beginning of creation that God separated the land and ordered all things according to God's desires. Throughout history it was understood that God's power was holding back the forces of the sea, restraining the waves from overtaking the world. In the new creation, Evil, as represented by the sea, will have been overcome forever.

The vision continues with some of the most beautiful words in all of Scripture. "God will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away." What would it be like to live in a world in which there was no need for tears? Can we even begin to imagine such a place? A world where death no longer takes those whom we love? A world in which the pain of poverty no longer exists. No more pictures of children in third world countries with distended bellies due to lack of food. A world in which diseases disappear, all human relationships restored, and

tears become a thing of the past. It's a hard world to imagine because it seems so foreign to the one we currently inhabit.

This past summer has been a season of tears. Losing dad, taking on a great deal of responsibility for keeping things going while mom recovers from a fractured vertebrae in her neck and later complications from surgery on her left hip, necessitating a ninety-day rehab stay. And, while enduring all my family's pain, watching my best friend, Carter Craigie, who was like a second father to me, slowly walking death's pathway. It's been a bit overwhelming. I've been worried literally about next steps for mom. Will she recover enough to be able to go back to her split-level house of 59 years or move into a patio home or assisted living facility? And if she moves into assisted living, where will that be, Kingsport, Tennessee where she has the gift of all her friends? Louisville, Kentucky where mom is originally from, where my brother now lives and where her sister is close by? Would she be able to live with us in our house in Christiansburg or go into assisted living near here? During this time of deep reflection, I've been haunted by existential questions—by increasing thoughts about my own mortality and the brevity of life. Has my own life and ministry been fruitful? Have I been a good enough father for my own kids? What will my children say about me when I've gone?

While I have experienced moments of deep sadness, generally I've been pretty numb to it all. Along this lonely road of grief, I have learned a tremendous lesson about life and faith. Our family has received an outpouring of support and encouragement from you and from the community. I can't begin to express my gratitude for the many ways that you have been agents of God's compassionate grace and mercy. Even in those darkest moments when the pain is raw and the demons of loneliness and depression are haunting me, I have discovered that, at the center of all things is gratitude. Gratitude for the love of my own family, mom and dad, my brother, Marcie, Matthew, and Melanie. Gratitude for each one of you as you walk this path with us. Gratitude to God for the calling God has placed upon my life to serve as your pastor and for placing us in this loving community of faith where compassion is in such abundance!

And so, we gather with all the Saints on this morning. We stand in what one early Christian preacher called “a golden chain,” linked together by our shared love of and faith in Jesus Christ. Today is a time when all eternity seems to come together in worship and at the communion table. We remember the past, those names and faces we have known here who now worship God and cheer us on as part of the great cloud of witnesses. We remember Wendell and Delorous, Dolan and Marlene, Carolyn and Virginia, Jenny and Mart, David and Donna, Shirley and Georgie, Robert and Phyllis, Nellie and Carol, Norma Jean and Louise, Annette and Jim, Harry and Mary, Wyatt and Ron, F.B. and Rennie, Pauline and Laymon, and all the generations who have worshipped here and who invested themselves as part of this community of Christ. And we acknowledge the future in hope—that God will do a new thing through us so that future generations will have a place to worship and learn and grow in their own faith and discipleship.

I’m not a scientist, but I take great comfort in the principles of quantum physics—that matter doesn’t go out of existence. It simply changes form. The universe is expanding. Science tells us so, and that doesn’t surprise me because the saints are still with us—part of the fabric of creation, part of the unending divine impulse, and part of our gatherings for worship. I love how Eugene Peterson translates these verses from the first chapter of Colossians in *The Message*: “[Jesus] was supreme in the beginning and—leading the resurrection parade—he is supreme in the end. So spacious is he, so roomy, that everything of God finds its proper place in him without crowding. Not only that, but all the broken and dislocated pieces of the universe—people and things, animals and atoms—get properly fixed and fit together in vibrant harmonies, all because of his death, his blood that poured down from the cross.”

So, on this All-Saints Day, let us come to the feast. Let us feast on the word and on the holy meal. Let us chew on the reality that we are Christ’s body here on earth gathered as the beloved community. We are among the saints, and we look for the resurrection of the body and the life to come. Let us celebrate with deep gratitude.