

Sermon

November 5, 2023

Feast of All Saints

Scriptures: Revelation 7:9-17, Psalm 34:1-10,22, 1 John 3:1-3, Matthew 5:1-12

The Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

When I walk in my garden in the morning, leaves from the cosmos, zinnias and potatoes lay on the ground curled and blackened by the first frost. Later, I pull out the pole beans and am surprised, but shouldn't be, that on the remaining zinnias and marigolds buzzing bees and butterflies hungrily gather nectar. Hummingbirds savor the sweetness of the red Epilobium, and towhees peck for seeds in the dirt under the apple tree. White crowned sparrows arrive daily from the north. This is a season of transition. Annual plants die, perennials go to sleep, insects, birds and deer forage and seek shelter for the winter. You and I change our clocks, bring out the wool and fleece, eat hearty soup again, and wonder anew about how we will live with growing darkness and chill.

The good news is that All Saints Day marks the beginning of a time of transition we in the church call the "Kingdom Season." Stretching from All Saints to the First Sunday in Advent, it's a time set apart to celebrate and reflect on "the reign of Christ in earth and heaven." Readings such as Revelation stretch our imaginations, psalms comfort us like chicken soup, and Gospels like the Beatitudes inspire and challenge us to live amid darkness knowing we are children of God, for that is what we are.

Some of you may know I did a study of clergy who led their churches to the ending of their ministry. In my interviews, pastors honored the Spirit's presence as the church community gathered in prayer to make a decision that meant the death their church. Maybe it was a church their grandfather built, where they were married, or where they wanted to have their own funeral. In this darkness pastors assured a grieving people of Jesus' presence with them in suffering. Pastors preached and hoped for resurrection and new life for the courageous band of witnesses who would set out for new spiritual homes. While I often heard Good Friday-like stories of unrequited anxiety, sadness, and confusion, I'll never forget words of one pastor who told her congregation: "You're an Easter people. Death is not the end. You're not supposed to be immortal. We're not immortal. Let's celebrate where it is and what it is and allow it to be something else."

How often life reminds us we are not immortal. Today and throughout this season we grieve the loss of loved ones whose names we pin up or remember in prayer.

We grieve the painful and unimaginable pain of the death of innocent children, women and men in wars, pandemics, famines and floods throughout the world. In our nation we grieve for innocents who died from gun or other violence, Fentanyl and addictions, inadequate health care or housing. We grieve the loss of animal and plant species, of ecological communities threatened by climate change.

In this season of darkness, we look to the light of Christ, the reign of Christ in earth and in heaven. Christ in earth among churches that witness like us today with music, prayer and praise. Christ in earth in the saints who listen to the cries of the poor, provide food and refuge for the unhoused, work for justice in places of oppression, and calm the fears of the anxious. Christ who through the saints we know, and the saints above, reveal God's saving power and love to all the world and to you and me. Christ in heaven who is faithful, just, merciful and full of truth and love.

Jesus lived when "honor" or blessing was restricted to those born into power, wealth and privilege, the "successful." Shame is its opposite, the loss of respect, regard and worth in the eyes of others. Not much has changed since then. Hate crimes reflecting ideas of white supremacy, religious intolerance and heterosexism shame and dishonor over 10,000 people a year, most (6/10) for race or ethnicity, and 17 percent each for religion and sexual orientation. Americans are quite unlikely to move far up (or down) the wealth ranks that earn honor, and followers of "Christian nationalism," an oxymoron, shame and dishonor so "losers" like the brave men and women striving against these tides for education, health, economic opportunities and a sense of well-being.

Someone recently asked me, "If you were Pope for a day, what would you do?" I said, "I'd ask all Christians to gather in small groups and do *lectio divina*, a form of quiet reflection, on the Beatitudes." I said this because saints abide in Jesus' grace and teachings in the Beatitudes, his first sermon in the Gospel of Matthew. To everyone shamed or dishonored by the world, Jesus bestows honor—honor to those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers and all persecuted for their faith as beloved children of God. Like that pastor who told her congregation not to be ashamed of dying, saints before us and saints today strive to turn our world's and nation's social patterns upside down, to replace shame and dishonor with the good news of honor, blessings and the unconditional love of God.

Saints we remember today "toiled and fought and lived and died for the Lord they loved and knew." We call them angels, but as St. John wrote, "what we will be has

not yet been revealed.” Unknowing doesn’t the author of the Book of Revelation from imagining a Kingdom of God filled with unceasing gratitude, praise, ample food and water, shelter and sun but no “scorching heat,” all tears wiped from our eyes. He imagines “a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, Jesus.” Even as we may feel the darkness and pain of wars or race, class and other social divisions, this glorious vision of an inclusive, peaceful kingdom of saints inspires us to trust the dream of God, the good news of Jesus and live as the children of God we are and, by grace, continue to be. The good news is we live among a kingdom of saints. Angels whisper in our ear, call us in our dreams and bless us with their love, as the psalmist promises, “The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him, and delivers them.”

This Feast of All Saints, Breathe. Breathe deeply. Breathe in the breath that God has given you in love, with which God honors your life in this world. Breathe out any anxiety, sadness, and confusion the world has caused you, or would have you believe. Breathe out guilt and shame and remember the words of St. John. “See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are...Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.”