

Year A, The Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost
2023

November 5,

Heaven All the Way to Heaven
Ballenger

The Rev. Barbara

My neighbors spent at least an entire month preparing for the eve of the feast days that we celebrate today. You know the one I mean – all up and down our street skeletons are walking dogs, having tea, and waving to neighbors. The porch next door became Hogwarts, replete with floating candles, a broomstick and Harry Potter’s owl, Hedwig. It was a lot of effort for the night before a feast day for the Eve of all Hallows.

But today we finally get around to celebrating the actual feasts – that feast of All Hallows, or All Saints, and the one that follows right on it’s heels, all souls. These can slip by without notice if we’re not careful. But they are important days in the church – days to mark those who stand on the other side of our hope for eternal life, those who look back at us with all their problems solved.

And so we sing a song of the saints of God, and we want to be one too.

On All Saints Day we as Church honor all the holy women and men of God who have died, the saints both known and unknown, especially those who led devout lives or were of heroic faith, and whom we count on being with God. Because I was raised a Catholic, I know this crowd pretty well.

When I was a little girl I loved to read the lives of the saints. On library day at St. Hilary School I would rush to the section of the library where they had the easy-reader books on the martyrs. I recall at least one tugging match with another kid over one of those books. Interesting that my behavior was far less than saintly when it came to getting my hands on those stories.

And oh what stories. I still remember the story of the first century martyr, this little boy who smuggled communion bread under his tunic to deliver it to Christians hiding in catacombs. How he was discovered by his unbelieving friends and martyred right there on the street. And that resonated with me because that was not unlike the playground at St. Hilary’s School. There were also the gory pictures and the statuary, like St. Sebastian’s Church which was just down the street and they had a statue filled with arrows. And then there were those beautiful stories of the miracles, like the rose petals that fell from the sky at the death of young Therese of Lisieux, the little flower, the child of Jesus.

But it wasn’t so much the lives of the saints that really appealed to me as it was the deaths of the saints, if I have to be honest. Images of martyrdom were a very big part of my second-grade imagination of the saints, as were monastic tonsures and the habits of nuns. I can still see very vividly those water-colored portraits with the eyes sort of pointing towards heaven that were in my Picture Book of Saints, circa 1972. Perhaps some of you had one of those. It was yellow.

But All Saints Day isn’t just for the heroes. On this day we roll in aspects of the feast of All Souls as well,

the Feast of the faithfully departed. We recall friends and loved ones who have died “in the faith.” We will name those beloveds in today’s reading of the necrology.

And this is where the celebration of the all Souls gets a bit trickier, because the faith of our loved ones can be a very private thing, largely hidden from us, while the questions and doubts they had might actually walk with us, just as we walk with our own questions and our own doubts. We do not know what our beloved ones encounter at death, just as we don’t know what our death will bring. And so for me, the Feast of All Saints tends to be more about what I hope for or have faith in rather than what I’m absolutely certain of.

And that makes it a good day for me to be in Church. Because our worship reminds us of all we do know about God’s love as we have experienced it, its patience, its forbearance, its forgiveness and its welcome, its power to restore dignity and to fill people with life. We cry out to a God who is that love, and we want that love for those who have gone before us. We want that love for those who come after us as well. And that’s why All Saints Day is traditionally a day for baptism. Not simply a day to recall those who have died, but to welcome new life as well. Which is what we are going to do when I’m done with this sermon – we’re going to welcome Lilah Brondson into the great cloud of witnesses that is the church – living and everliving.

It’s no small thing.

A few years ago when I was at St Martin’s we were baptizing a teenager, who had asked for the sacrament. And he wanted it to be full immersion. Before the service I asked him what he felt about what he was going to do. He said “well, it’s the most important thing I’m going to do in my everlasting life, so I might as well do it right.”

That means that the most important thing that one can do in one’s eternal life is to begin. Which is what Baptism does. The second most important thing is to continue.

On these celebrations of saints and souls we stop and savor the prospect of everlasting life, even though we can’t be certain what will happen next on any given day. We know we are in the middle of it, wherever we stand, whether we stand here in this life or in the next one.

The author of the first letter of John describes it this way: **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.**

In the meantime we turn again and again to what we have already seen of God’s love as we’ve experienced it: its patience, its forbearance, its forgiveness and welcome, its power to restore dignity and its ability to fill people with life. We turn to a God who is that love, and we want that love in this life, for this world. And so we commit to living it as best we can, imperfectly, earnestly, in faith. And we’ll do that we renew our own baptismal promises in support of Lilah.

I think that is what the life of a saint looks like. Saints believe anyway – despite their doubts. They love anyway - despite the evil that tears things apart, that often tears them apart. And they reach for God anyway - despite all the limitations that make it hard to see God clearly. And God reaches back into that life with the will to be found.

This is the glorious promise of the beatitudes – the gift of feeling fully blessed now because of what God promises will be, promises that are worth waiting for. Like the time when there will be an end to mourning. Where there will be a Kingdom of God fully at hand, and an earth worth inheriting. A time when we won't hunger for or long for justice and righteousness, but will see it fully lived. Where there is mercy and peace and a God who is undoubtedly with us. What Christian does not wait and long for the eve of that day? Who upon reading the news these past several weeks does not long for peace and love and a mercy to come soon.

God's call to us every-day saints is to help one another recognize the blessing that is now and anticipate the promise that is not yet. It helps that we get tastes of these beatitude promises – comfort in our mourning, experiences of justice, times of peace, glimpses of the kingdom, what a glorious autumn day tells us of the earth that is our inheritance.

The promise of the Feast of All Saints and all souls is that we need not wait for an old life to end and a new one to begin, even in the chaos of this current time.

It's Heaven all the way to Heaven, writes Dorothy Day, my hero, founder of the Catholic Worker Movement, who I'm sure is in Heaven. She was paraphrasing Saint Catherine of Sienna, who reportedly said "All the way to Heaven is Heaven because Jesus is the way."

And for now, on the feasts of All Saints and all souls, I will take their word for it.

So let's live into that call to make saints with a Baptism – so I invite Tierney and Susan and Shannon to bring Lilah back to the font as we rise and sing.

Amen.