

All Saints Sunday
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November 5, 2006
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Isaiah 25:6-9; Psalm 24;
Revelation 21:1-62; John 11:32-44

Grace to you and peace from God who is, who was, and who is to come. Amen.

Yesterday I was down in our kitchen looking for a cup of coffee (I had spent the morning at St. Matthew's Lutheran in Hanover because we had the Synod meeting down there . . . that was really "edge of the pew" exciting. Actually it was a meeting to discuss the Synod missions committee and help form some of the goals; in fact Trinity member Linda Leber is on the committee). So anyway, I got back to the church and was looking for some coffee, and as I walked into the Gathering Space, there was Pastor Hardy and he was all excited to see me (he doesn't usually get that excited about seeing me) because, believe it or not, we were *Having a Problem with the Sound System in the Nave*. I know, it's hard to comprehend. Anyway, we finally got things straightened out, got set up, I sat at the sound board through the wedding for Pastor Hardy, and finally decided it was time to work on my sermon. But first I needed a cup of coffee.

So, I'm down in the kitchen (knowing there will be some, because it's the men's Christ Renews His Parish weekend and they always have food because that's the one thing Lutheran organizations do – wherever two or more are gathered together, you shall have food!) and Bob Foster was there. Bob and I were chatting and talking about it being All Saints Weekend, and he looked at me and said, "What should I know about All Saints Day?"

What a wonderful question! What should we know about All Saints Day? So I got out my *Worship Without Words: The Signs and Symbols of our Faith* by Patricia S. Klein; let me read to you what she has to say:

All Saints Day is a major feast honoring those who have died in the faith. The word "Saint" is the English translation of the Greek word *Hagioi* (from *hagios*, "holy") and is used in Scripture to describe those called out of the world to be holy and set apart for God. It was a word applied to all followers of Christ, all members of his Church.

During the time of the persecutions in the early Church, those who had been killed for their faith (called martyrs, Greek for "witness") were honored for their sacrifice and were given the designation "saint". Those who had endured torture for their faith but had not died were called *confessors*. There is evidence that these martyrs were honored by a feast day (called "All Martyrs") from a very early time, ultimately resulting in the feast day known as All Saints' Day (first celebrated on May 13, then moved to November 1 by the ninth century).

With the Reformation (*Remember? – we celebrated that last week*) came a return to the scriptural understanding of saints as being the entire body of believers, all who have been sanctified by the Holy Spirit, with no distinctions made for special class of believers. This also eliminated the distinction between All Saints' (martyrs) and All Souls' (faithful departed).

Today, All Saints Day is a major feast in all churches, honoring all Christian saints, known and unknown.

All Saints Day. Now it's a little difficult for us as Lutherans because we've got these two festivals back-to-back. We celebrate Reformation on October 31 and we celebrate All Saints Day on November 1; and since most often those days don't fall on Sunday, and hard for both of those days to fall on Sunday right after each other, we celebrate them the Sunday closest to them so last week we celebrated Reformation, this week we celebrate All Saints Day.

So as we celebrate All Saints Day, and we listen to those scripture lessons, we think to ourselves, what the heck to they have to do with All Saints Day? Because they don't really seem to fit – there are references to Isaiah and Revelation and John's gospel.

Isaiah talks about feasts and burial shrouds and rejoicing and mourning; what he's talking about what the faithful of Isaiah's day called the Day of the Lord. That was the day the leaders were looking for God to come down, for the Messiah to come, for this great military-minded leader to come down and gather the faithful together, to attack the enemies of Israel and the enemies of God, and unite the world (as it was known) into one. There would indeed be great feasts and rejoicing. The Day of the Lord.

Then we compare that with what we heard in John's Revelation (by the way, there's no "s" at the end of that word; it's just all one long revelation) we have God coming down to us, the new Jerusalem descending from heaven onto earth; we have God coming to us; death is abolished; pain is banished. Just as in the Old Testament Day of the Lord, John gives us the New Testament imagery for the Day of the Lord.

So, then we jump to the Gospel that has . . . really not a lot to do with the Day of the Lord. So what is involved here? It's a good story, though, isn't it? It's a great story about a guy named Lazarus (although we know nothing about Lazarus until we get to the eleventh chapter of John). Clearly this guy means something to Jesus; he's very important somehow because when Jesus gets word that Lazarus is ill, he becomes distraught (we didn't get in the Lazarus story; if you want the whole story, go home and read the entire eleventh chapter of John). Jesus is distraught and he wants to hurry back to Galilee, back to where Lazarus and his sisters Mary and Martha lived. The disciples say, "Lord, are you nuts? We just came from there! Don't you remember, they were plotting to kill us?" Well, not all of the disciples, one of them, a guy named Thomas (yep, the same one; the guy who gets the bum rap about being a doubter) said, "Look, if our Lord is going back there to die, then let us go and die with him".

So they return and are greeted by the sisters and the news that Lazarus has died. This upsets Jesus, and it's here that we get the shortest verse in the entire scripture, well in the Greek it's the shortest verse, it's only two words, and in the wonderful King James Version, verse 35 is translated as "Jesus wept". Jesus was so distraught over the death of his friend that he began to cry. They get to the tomb. Jesus asks for the stone to be rolled away. (Jesus, at the tomb, with the stone to be rolled away? Can you say "foreshadow"?) Anyway, Jesus is standing at the tomb and orders the stone to be rolled away. Martha, Lazarus's sister, says, "Lord! He's been dead for four days! He's really starting to smell!"

Now, we have to realize that in first century Jerusalem, when someone died, they weren't dead until three days after they had died. Today, we have all sorts of tests and diagnostic devices that can tell the exact moment when we die, but they didn't have those things in the first century, and sometimes people were just asleep, or were unconscious, or were in a coma, and sometimes people would come out of those in three days, so if you didn't come out of that coma in three days, then you were really dead and if you were really dead, your body was wrapped and perfumed and prepared for burial. And what they would do was take the body and wrap it up and put it in a tomb (which was really a cave). And they would just leave the body there, and let the bugs and bacteria do their thing. And in a year's time, they would gather up all the bones together and finally give them what we would call a burial.

Back to Lazarus. It hasn't been three days, it's been **four** days. Lazarus is really dead. His body has started to decompose, and Jesus wants to move the stone. Martha said, Lord, he stinks! It's really, really going to smell. Jesus ignores her, and has the stone rolled away.

What does this have to do with All Saints Day? Do you remember Revelation? God comes down to us. The new Jerusalem comes to us. There is nothing we can do about it. It doesn't come because we ask it to; the new Jerusalem comes to us. In the Gospel, Jesus stood at the mouth of the tomb, called to stinking, rotting Lazarus, "Lazarus, come out!" Did Lazarus stay laying dead in the tomb? No. Jesus calls; Lazarus comes. And just as Jesus stood at the edge of the tomb and called out to Lazarus, Jesus stands at the edge of our tomb that we call life and calls to us. He calls to us in all our stinkiness and all our rottenness, He calls to us in all of our sinfulness. He stands at the mouth of our lives, at the mouth of our tomb, knowing full well the lousy things that we do, the way we mistreat others, the way we abuse ourselves, the way we lie, cheat, steal, and still He promises us new life when He comes. We don't go to the new Jerusalem, the new Jerusalem comes to us. Jesus calls us to Him. Oh, we can choose to stay in our own stinking, rotting bodies, but Jesus calls us to Him to leave that rottenness behind and grab on to the new life that is in Christ, the new life that those who have joined the church eternal are celebrating right now.

Okay. Do you remember my Saturday? I bring it up again so that hopefully some of you get a little bit of a laugh, but also because I need to remind myself that even in the midst of things that don't seem to be related and in the midst of my own busy-ness, God is there.

What do I need to know about All Saints Day? Even when I think I'm doing God's work, I need to be reminded that it's not about me, it's about God. It's not about my work here, it's about my work now on this earth, in this life, that we the living, are living toward that new life.

Let me leave you with a story from Vernard Eller's book, *Christian Anarchy: Jesus' Primacy Over the Powers*. Some of you may have heard about one of the twentieth century's preeminent theologian, Karl Barth. Karl Barth died in his sleep on December 9, 1968. He had spent the entire day working on a lecture, and was still at work in the evening when he was interrupted by two telephone calls about 9 o'clock. One of the calls was from his godson, Ulrich Barth, to whom he quoted a verse from a hymn which spoke comfortingly about the Christian hope. The other person who wanted to speak with him so late at night was his friend of 60 years, Eduard Thurneysen. They talked about the gloomy world situation in 1968, and then Barth said to him, "But keep your chin up! Never mind! Christ will reign!"

Christ will reign. What wonderful words to remember before we go for a good night' sleep. What wonderful words to remember before we go to sleep for eternity. Christ will reign. Christ reigns today. He reigns today in our hearts and he calls us forth to do His will and reminds us on this All Saints Day that He is with us. Always.

Amen.