

These Are They

All Saints Day
November 1, 2020

Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost – These Are They
[Revelation 7:9-17](#)

INTRODUCTION

All Saints Day falls on a Sunday this year. John Wesley considered it one of the greatest celebrations in the life of the church. “How superstitious are they who scruple giving God solemn thanks for the lives and deaths of his saints!” said Wesley in 1756. Year after year, he commented on the celebration of the saints. It was a festival he dearly loved.

We too love the remembrance of the saints of the church. Many congregations have different traditions for this celebration. But it seems especially pertinent to observe All Saints this year. It is possible that because of the pandemic and the safety regulations against gathering in large groups that there have been church members who have died and there was no opportunity to celebrate their lives in the body of the church. If that is the case, this All Saints Day can be an opportunity for the community to grieve together and to reclaim the hope of the Resurrection, even as you acknowledge the legacy that remains from the blessed saints of the church.

The funeral service or Service of Death and Resurrection in the *Book of Worship* is designed to be a service of celebration and hope, even while it helps us acknowledge the deep grief we feel at the loss of the loved one from our sight. This All Saints worship could turn to the services usually used for funeral services as a way of giving voice to the congregation’s need to acknowledge the loss. The prayers that we usually use would be helpful here, as would the opening gathering statement or Word of Grace. These words can provide a sense of comfort and hope in a difficult time.

Contact with the families who have lost a loved one can include an opportunity to provide a display of photos or objects that were meaningful or descriptive of the individual's life, much like would have been done at a funeral or visitation. If the church is still mostly online, then a digital slideshow, necessarily brief, of the person remembered would be a meaningful way to celebrate his or her life.

There is space within the funeral service to celebrate Communion, as this is a first Sunday of the month, and many churches keep to that pattern. It is possible, of course, to lift prayers out of the Service of Death and Resurrection and put them into the more familiar Sunday morning order.

This is not a call to hold a funeral service during the usual worship hour, however. All Saints is about acknowledging those who have died recently, as well as those who have died throughout history. It is to acknowledge those who are no longer a part of this congregation but also those who are a part of the larger congregation of the body of Christ.

At the same time, All Saints Day provides an opportunity to remember the promises of eternity. It is a way of looking through all that is surrounding us now into a future that looks significantly different. Not an escape, All Saints is a call to action, to live into this possible future, the kin-dom of God, where—as our text reminds us—there is no hunger or thirst, and there is comfort for those who mourn and those who suffer in the hands of God. However you envision this hope, it is a grace to cling to in uncertain times. We look toward the multitudes who have gone before as a promise and a beacon of light in our darkness. These are they who have gone before; let us celebrate them, even as we honor them by how we live.

PREACHING NOTES

Although on the landing page for this stand-alone service, we recommend to look to the Service of Death and Resurrection for insight into this All Saints Day worship experience, you are not preaching a eulogy. This is the time for a proclamation of the Word in a way that brings hope to a congregation struggling with loss and uncertainty and a nation divided by fear and hate. This is the time to speak of the promise of the kin-dom, of the gathering of the people of God into a fellowship of peace and comfort. This gathering is not just for “us” as opposed to “them.” This is a gathering of all tribes and peoples and languages, singing praise to the one who is their unity and their hope. That’s what you proclaim this day.

You might, however, choose to do it through the very real lives lost since the last All Saints celebration. You might do it with their stories and their witness. Perhaps there are those in that number who can serve as an example of acceptance and inclusion. Perhaps there are those who have, through their suffering or their labor, brought a sign of redemption into the consciousness of the community of faith. “These are they who have come through a great ordeal,” you might say, “who have borne witness to the goodness of God even as they struggled in their lives.”

The “this” that our passage comes after is the numbering of the saved (or the “sealed”) from the twelve tribes of Israel: the one hundred forty-four thousand that you might have heard referred to a time or two before. In fact, you have heard some say that there are *only* 144,000 in heaven. That is why you have to pay attention and make sure you got your number! Those folks obviously stopped reading before verse nine of chapter seven: “A great multitude no one could count” seems to be pretty inclusive.

Then we have the question from the elder. “Who are these?”

Did he not know? Was it a device to test John? Or was it just a way of starting a conversation? “Who are these?” Turns out they are those who have found their way into the kingdom. But it wasn’t a walk in the park. It took some doing, some effort, some struggle on their part.

The elder, when he at last recognizes them, or checks the program, or reveals what he knows all along, says that this multitude has come through a great

ordeal. Older versions called it the tribulation. Some say it points to a specific event, having to do with the end times, the last battle, or the suffering that comes along with it. Others say that it is the ordeal of living in uncertain times. Maybe it refers to something cataclysmic and world-encompassing, or maybe it refers to ordeals like those we read about in our newspapers or see listed in our prayer chains – ordeals of illness or infirmity, ordeals of abuse or victimization, ordeals of hunger and poverty, ordeals of . . . well, you fill in the blank. There are so many ordeals, so many struggles, large and small, out there in the world. So, it may be the sum of all of them that add up to the great ordeal that the elder speaks of in verse fourteen.

“But wait,” you say, “it has to be more than just survival, more than just getting through whatever the struggles are.” And you would be right. They came through, the elder tells us, and they washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. That is one little indicator that you can’t take this literally! Washing robes in blood won’t make them white. So, what does it mean?

Blood, in the Bible, usually means life, sometimes a life of sacrifice. This multitude, then, are the ones who put on the life of the Lamb. St. Paul is always telling us to put on our faith, to put on the attributes of Christ, to put on the fruit of the Spirit. These are the ones who put on Christ, put on his life, and lived it as though it were their own. They lived it in front of any and all, particularly those in need. They lived and worked for the benefit of others.

They are the ones who cared for you, the ones who loved you. On All Saints Day, they are the ones we remember – those who loved and cared and now are no longer there to do so. Some of those we have missed will come again when we gather. But there are many of those white-robed saints who aren’t coming home. And they have left a hole in our midst; they have left tasks for others to do. They have given an example that someone has to pick up. They have left caring that others need to do.

In other words, it is our time in the laundry room. We wash our robes in the blood, in the life and witness and example of the Lamb, and then we put that witness on and begin to look like him and act like him. And love like him. And comfort like him. That’s the promise; and that’s the hope: That all that divides us,

all that terrorizes us, all that wounds us will be gone. And the unity of the Spirit will be unity indeed.

Who are these? These are they who we remember. And they are we.

LITURGICAL RESOURCES

As stated on the Planning Worship page for this service, you will have to determine the mood for this All Saints Day service. It is always a time of remembrance, a way of celebrating the witness of those who bore your name in the past. But this year, there may be a special poignancy, as we haven't been able to properly grieve and say goodbye to those we have lost in these recent months. So, while this isn't the space for a funeral service, it would not be out of line to let those prayers speak to this moment, a moment of remembrance and grief, as well as a profound hope for the future.

Let there be candles lit in memory of those who are named and remembered. For those who may be worshiping online, invite them to find a candle to light as they say a name or many names of those they want to remember in this space. Candle lighting can be done while physically distancing, if you are worshiping in person. Have ushers or hosts help keep the lines far enough apart. But let the flame represent the Spirit as well as the spirits of those who are still a part of us in the mystery that is eternity.

Invite the families of the honored dead to prepare a brief biography, a few lines to tell something of the grace of their lives to be read or published or posted online for the whole congregation to read or hear. Perhaps these contemporary stories could be interspersed with historic stories of the saints of the church or community or the faith in general. Let the modern saints reside alongside the saints we remember from history.

This is a day of looking forward, even as we remember the past we shared with the beloved of God. We long for the fulfillment of the promises and the in-breaking of eternity that we might stand with those who have gone before. So, while there is sadness and the grief of loss, there is also the joy of the promise. So, we *sing a song with the saints of God (712, United Methodist Hymnal)* in hope and celebration of all that is ours in God.

Prayer (*Pastoral or Opening Meditation*)

That one that I loved, O God, is now with you.
I can say that, not knowing "how" or "where,"
but say it because it makes no sense
 that so rich and full a life
 would come to an abrupt end ...
 except for memories.

Still, I am bereft for she is not with me.
I listen to all the clichés of my friends,
 spoken to console me:
 "She is better off."
 "She is past her pain and suffering."
 "She is in heaven," whatever that means.

I listen and am not consoled.

My grief is selfish.

I want to feel her touch
 and hear her voice
 and see her smile.

I am confident she is with you,
 and I am just as confident, O Lord,
 you understand how it is with me.

I cannot help recalling times
 I might have been gentler, softer, more thoughtful.

I wish I could live some hours over.

I wish I could say "I love you" just one more time.

These failures I must accept.

"Time heals all things," they say.

I do not believe Time does anything.

You, O God, are Healer and Helper.

You can heal me in time,

 help me through the lonely days and long nights.

You can give me renewed zest for going on

and entering into life once more.

“Thanks be to God who gives us the victory
through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

I believe that.

But right now I grieve; I hurt; I am bereft.

Thanks be to God who understands
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

(Kenneth G. Phifer, A Book of Uncommon Prayer, Upper Room Books, 1981, pp. 106-107)

Call to Worship

Leader: We have come to affirm our historic faith.

People: To worship the God of our mothers and fathers.

Leader: We have come to remember God’s benefits to us the living.

People: To respond in thanksgiving to the mighty works of God in our lives.

Leader: We have come to affirm our trust in the God of all futures,

People: To whose name be blessing and honor, glory and power forever and ever. Amen.

(Ruth Duck, Bread for the Journey, Pilgrim Press, 1981, p.56.)

Opening sentences

Lord, open my lips and my mouth will proclaim your praise.

I arise today, through God’s strength to pilot me:

God’s might to uphold me, God’s wisdom to guide me,

God’s eye to look before me, God’s ear to hear me,

God’s word to speak for me, God’s hand to guard me,

God’s way to lie before me, God’s shield to protect me,

God’s host to secure me: against snares of devils,

against temptations of vices, against inclinations of nature,

against everyone who shall wish me ill,
afar and near, alone and in a crowd.

(<https://scpeanutgallery.com/2014/09/20/morning-prayer-20-sept-revelation-79-17-bliss-of-the-redeemed/>)

Opening Prayer

(inspired by Revelation 7: 9-17)

We seek and find you in Creation, O God,
in the world you have made and the people you have called.
Your vulnerable, powerful Lamb is our shepherd and guide,
leading us to share the shelter of your abundant life.

Let us recognize you here
in the beauty of this morning and in its challenge;

may the Risen One, your Shepherd-Lamb,
lead us to act for your justice and peace:
so that all may drink from your springs of the waters of life,
and find their tears of sorrow and pain wiped away.
In the name of the Risen One we pray: Amen.

*(from the United Church of Christ. Posted on **Wild and Precious Life**.
<http://stephenmfearing.wordpress.com/category/easter/>. Reposted: <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2016/04/opening-prayer-revelation-79-17.html>)*

The Corporate Confession

Leader: God, you send us saints ...

People: And we imprison them, or nail them on crosses. Have mercy.

Leader: God, you send us saints ...

People: And we persuade ourselves that they are fools, or meddlers or incompetents. Have mercy.

Leader: God, you send us saints ...

People: And we hate them for reminding us that our comfort requires the poverty of others. Have mercy.

Leader: God, you send us saints ...

People: And we ignore them. Have mercy.

(Some moments of reflective silence)

Words of Assurance

God's Word to us is a word of forgiveness, a word of assurance, a word of grace. We are loved and accepted because we are we and God is God and nothing can finally separate us from our Creator, our Parent, our Sustainer. Amen.

*(Wheaton United Methodist Church, Illinois, **Flames of the Spirit**, Ruth Duck Ed., Pilgrim Press, 1985, p.55.)*

A Prayer Meditation for All Saints Day

We give you thanks, O God, for all the saints who ever worshiped you
Whether in brush arbors or cathedrals,
Weathered wooden churches or crumbling cement meeting houses
Where your name was lifted and adored.

We give you thanks, O God, for hands lifted in praise:
Manicured hands and hands stained with grease or soil,
Strong hands and those gnarled with age
Holy hands
Used as wave offerings across the land.

We thank you, God, for hardworking saints;
Whether hard-hatted or steel-booted,
Head ragged or aproned,
Blue-collared or three-piece-suited
They left their mark on the earth for you, for us, for our children to come.

Thank you, God, for the tremendous sacrifices made by those who have gone before us.

Bless the memories of your saints, God.

May we learn how to walk wisely from their examples of faith, dedication, worship, and love.

<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/a-prayer-meditation-for-all-saints-day>

Corporate Prayer

Let us pray (in silence) [as we rejoice and keep festival in honor of all the saints]

pause

Almighty God,
your saints are one with you
in the mystical body of Christ:
give us grace to follow them
in all virtue and holiness
until we come to those inexpressible joys
which you have prepared for those
who truly love you;

through Jesus Christ our Lord,
who is alive with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God now and forever.

Amen.

<https://liturgy.co.nz/reflections/all-saints>

Words of Assurance: Revelation 21: 1-6

Behold:
there is a new heaven,
 a new earth
 and a new city,
where the river of life flows,
where the tree of life bears fruit in every season.

This heaven,
this city,
 this river,
 this tree
are a vision of your life
reborn, restored, and renewed.

Thanks be to God!

(<https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2013/04/words-of-assurance-revelation-21-1-6.html>)

Benediction

(based on Revelation 7: 12, 16-17)

Blessing and glory and wisdom
and thanksgiving and honor and power
and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen!

We go out to be God's people.

Go in strength to be the saints of God
for you will hunger no more, and thirst no more;
the sun will not strike you, nor any scorching heat.

We go out to be God's people.

Live the way of God with confidence
for God is your shepherd,
and will guide you to the spring of life.

We go out to be God's people.

(from [Seasons of the Spirit: All Saints Day—Year A](#), published by WoodLake Publishing. Reposted:
<https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2011/10/benediction-revelation-7.html>)