

Soul Friends Forever

Sermon by Jan Wiersma

Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

All Saints' Day - November 7, 2021

Texts: Isaiah 25:6-9, Revelation 21:1-6a, John 11:32-44

RESPONSIVE READING Isaiah 25:6-9 (adapted)

On this mountain the God 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.

And the God of life will destroy on this mountain
the shroud that is cast over all peoples,

and will swallow up the shadow of death forever.

Then the Eternal One will wipe away the tears from all faces,
and will take away the disgrace of the people from all the earth.

We will say on that day, This is our God, for whom we have waited,

We have not waited in vain; truly, we have been saved.

Let us be glad and rejoice in our salvation.

SCRIPTURE READING Revelation 21:1-6a

The promise of life everlasting means God lives with and in us always, even now. The new creation is revealed among us.

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. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And 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; he 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." And 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." Then 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."

GOSPEL READING John 11:32-44

Grief and love go hand in hand; they are part of life, but sorrow does not destroy us. By faith, we are unbound not only from death, but from the fear of death that paralyzes our lives.

When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord,

already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.” Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, “Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.” When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.” Keep these words in your heart. The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. TBTG

We human beings tend to think in linear time: past, present, and future. I’m not sure my dog thinks that way; for her, it’s more like, hungry. Now. Outside. Now. Take a nap. Now.

I’m not sure God thinks or exists in linear time, either, though I have even less access to the mind of God than the mind of my dog. But we have been given the mystery of our faith in ten words:

“Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.” Past, present, future, right?

But what if this is all in the now? What if we said, instead, Christ dies. Now. Christ rises. Now. Christ comes to us. Now. Celebrating both All Saints and communion, as we do today, makes me think: we seize this moment when time touches eternity, when heaven is not some far-off future, when the veil between life and death grows thin, when souls of those who went before are here with us. And, if you look at it that way, so are the souls of those who are still to come.

Let me tell you a true story. In my younger days, I delighted in being a rebel, a vagabond, roaming the earth. I had broken my grandparents’ hearts by refusing to be confirmed and join the church. My parents worried constantly when I was traveling. I grew up believing that my duty was to love God but God hated me, or at least strongly disapproved of my sinfulness.¹ I objected to that idea, but I didn’t replace it. I was 28 years old, living in Japan, when I returned to church, and when I took communion for the first time. I had just learned that my mother was dying far away in Minnesota. That Sunday I simply filed up to the front of the church with everyone else, knelt, and held out my hands for the bread, the cup. In the silence, bells pealed, fireworks filled the sky, friends and family both dead and alive burst out singing, while Jesus and all the angels in heaven danced. There was no past, present, or future. There was simply now, and always had been and always will be. Christ dies. Christ rises. Christ comes to us now. My grandparents’ hearts are not broken, God loves me, and always did, and my parents are alive, in heaven and in me. Forever. This is what All Saints means to me; All Saints, and the communion of the saints.

That story is still this story: Many years later, in *this* now, I am still *there*, kneeling and holding out my hands for life and love. I’m also a pastor, a chaplain, a hospice chaplain. Hospice, as it was intended, is not about moving people toward death while they’re still alive, but about

¹ OK, I sort of stole this from a reader write-in to Richard Rohr’s daily meditations. But it’s also true for me.

helping people live so that in every moment time touches eternity. Pursuing this truth, I studied the sacred art of dying with the group called the Sacred Art of Living. One of the inspirations for this great program is John O'Donohue, the Irish priest, teacher, and writer who popularized the term "anam cara," meaning "soul friend." A hospice chaplain tries to be a soul friend. So can anyone who shows up in your time of need and doesn't run away when the going gets tough.

John O'Donohue flew from Ireland to the U.S. to help launch the Sacred Art of Living Center. When his plane touched down, he received word that his mother had just died. He turned around and flew back to Ireland, pausing long enough to share this news with the Sacred Art of Living people. "But remember," he said, in his lovely Irish accent, "that your anam cara is even more helpful to you dead than alive." Six weeks later, he himself died unexpectedly in his sleep, at just 52 years old. He continues to bless and inspire all those he touched as anam cara. As another saint (John Chrysostom) said, "Those whom we love and lose are no longer where they were before. They are now wherever you are." Now. Christ dies. Christ rises. Christ comes to us. Now.

On All Saints, we remember all our anam caras, all whose souls befriended and strengthened our own. This is why we light the candles, say their names, ring the bell, and invite them to "stay with us." As they do. But we also remember in advance, if I can say it that way, the saints to come, our children, and our children's children; we are their anam caras, their soul friends forever, too. Eternity is now. When you catch a glimpse of yourself through God's eyes, you see all your sins forgiven, past-present-*and*-future. You see yourself loved, forever; even when you're back in that wretched state of failure when you just want to die. And you may glimpse the world your descendants inhabit, a better world than this, maybe. God's time is eternity.

The saints I name and hold close to my heart today were not perfect people; they were badly flawed. My grandfather told the most appallingly inappropriate jokes; no race or ethnic identity was immune. My mother in a rage could send the whole family running for cover. Some of my father's investments, I'm sure, perpetuated human suffering in countries out of sight and out of mind. Good Christian "saints" through the centuries held beliefs that scandalize us now. Saints fought bloody battles in the name of Christ; whole countries were baptized at sword point. Those we name saints today helped plunder the earth and squander her resources and create a dangerously unstable climate for saints yet unborn and unnamed. You and I did this, too, and still do. Will those future saints forgive us? They are here with us, too. Ask them!

I think these saints we remember in advance, would urge us, as we re-enter a world of past, present, and future, to do the best we can. They tell us we can do better than saints before us, using all our tools and technology to improve the world, not degrade it. They also invite us to remember that no matter how well we do, we'll get some things wrong that we thought were right. And they ask us to stay with them, their souls' friends forever, when time touches eternity. Christ dies. Christ rises. Christ comes to us. Now. Amen. Thanks be to God.



On this All Saints' Day, we also remember those in our country who have died of the covid pandemic, now numbering 754,000, a quarter of a million souls. The flags on the national mall are part of an art installation (September 17-October 3) by artist Suzanne Brennan Firstenberg, intended to honor those dead and remind us of the enormity of our loss.

Prayers

For people who are poor, vulnerable, and imperiled;
for the greater whole of which we are all a part; that all of us may glorify you, our Creator;
for the good that creatures provide to other creatures;
for the good of the order of creatures, by which the cosmos is sustained;
for the emergent universe and the communion of subjects;
for the solidarity that binds us to all creatures; for the promotion of justice for all beings;
for the sacred that lies at the heart of all things;
for greater nonviolence and peace; for the interdependence among and within all creatures;
for all of our relations above, below, and around us; throughout time and space.
For all the saints, who have gone before, all those still to come, and those alive, here and now in this place and time. We name them before you now, aloud or in the sacred silence of our hearts.

(Prayers adapted from Richard Rohr's daily online meditation, Friday, November 5, 2021)