

The Reverend Marjo Anderson

C: All Saints Sunday

Daniel 7:1-3, 15-18, Ephesians 1:11-23, Luke 6:20-31

**6 November 2022
Salem, Bridgeport**

“Held in God’s Arms”

Today we gather on All Saints Sunday.

The celebration of All Saints began so long ago that we’re not exactly sure of its origins. But one tradition says that there were so many different saints being celebrated that every day was a saint’s day and when there got to be too many they were all combined into one.

Another tradition says that in the early church during a time of persecution, All Saints was meant to honor the martyrs, replacing the gods of the Roman pantheon with those Christians who had died in the faith.

In our time All Saints Day has become the day when we remember the saints who have gone before us – not only the saints in the biblical record and those famous Christians throughout history, but the saints who have influenced our own lives.

Each of us is here because someone influenced us to be here.

And so today we look back on all those who have brought us to this place in our faith journey. We also use this day to remember those of our faith community who have died this past year.

The texts for all saints are selected to comfort, to give hope, and to inspire trust in God when it is most needed.

Comfort, hope, and trust, after all, are the things that carry us through all of the trials and tribulations and challenges of this life, including the loss of people dear to us.

Our first lesson comes from the book of Daniel and is something known as apocalyptic literature.

Apocalyptic literature is something that is written in a style similar to what we know as science fiction, is highly symbolic, and is written during a time of crisis for the express purpose of giving people hope.

In the case of this passage from Daniel, the four beasts represent the empires of the world, and the vision reminds Daniel and his audience and us that the empires of this world will not win, because they are antithetical to God’s kingdom, God’s kingdom which will triumph.

The gospels appointed for All Saints Sunday follow a three-year cycle but in two of those years we get the beatitudes, Matthew in year A, and Luke in year C.

The beatitudes were no doubt selected because of the verse, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted”.

But there is much more than this one verse in the gospel to inspire hope.

Jesus says that those who are poor and hungry, those who weep, and those who are excluded and marginalized and oppressed are blessed, and he goes on to say that those who are rich and full, those who are laughing, and those who are enjoying power and privilege are cursed.

There are several different ways of interpreting this passage.

One is simply that Jesus is stating the obvious – that nothing in this life is permanent.

Every day I listen to inspirational readings –

and one of the books is The Greatest Salesman in the World by Og Mandino.

It includes 10 scrolls of wisdom, and I take one and listen to it every day for 30 days.

Then I move onto the next one, and when I have listened to all 10, I start over.

Well, it just so happens that the scroll I am listening to this month includes these words....

“I will laugh at the world. And how can I laugh when confronted with man or deed which offends me so as to bring forth my tears or my curses?

Four words I will train myself to say until they become a habit so strong

that immediately they will appear in my mind whenever good humor threatens to depart from me.

These words, passed down from the ancients,

will carry me through every adversity and maintain my life in balance.

These four words are: This too shall pass.... For all worldly things shall indeed pass.

When I am heavy with heartache, I shall console myself that this too shall pass;

when I am puffed with success, I shall warn myself that this too shall pass.

When I am strangled in poverty, I shall tell myself that this too shall pass;

when I am burdened with wealth, I shall tell myself that this too shall pass.”

In other words, no matter what pleasure or what pain you are experiencing at the moment, understand that it is temporary.

In this earthly life, nothing physical or material lasts forever.

And this is one of the things that Jesus is pointing out –

is that everything on earth is temporary; only the things of God are eternal.

So, if you are experiencing grief or pain this morning,

if you are going through trials and tribulations, know that it will get better.

And if you are in a good place right now, let your awareness that your life could change in an instant

be motivation for you to act with compassion to those who are suffering today; that could be you tomorrow.

Another thing that Jesus is pointing out

is the message that God sees things very differently from how the world sees them.

We think that being blessed means being happy & having enough money & enough food & enough comfort.

We think that being cursed means

being unhappy and NOT having enough money and enough food and enough comfort.

But Jesus teaches us, time and time again, that while material things may bring us pleasure, they do not bring us joy.

Joy comes from being in the right relationship with God, regardless of what is going on in our life.

Because that's the case, because God has designed us primarily to be in relationship with God

and secondarily to be in relationship to one another

and thirdly to be in relationship to the earth, that's where our priorities need to be –

not in the material, but in the spiritual – which is by definition relational.

God is Spirit, and the only way we can connect with God is through our own human spirits.

And when we connect with God on a spiritual level,

we automatically connect with everyone else who is connected with God on that spiritual level.

That's why I can pray for a miracle, and God can immediately answer my prayer through a stranger who calls to tell me God told him he needs to send me thousands of dollars.

That's what the communion of saints means.

The communion of saints is not an ecumenical organization.

The communion of saints is not a membership list of congregations from the first churches until now.

The communion of saints is not a physical or a practical or a material thing;

it is a spiritual thing that exists outside of time and space.

Did any of you ever watch the movie, "Place in the Heart" with Sally Fields?

The story is set in rural Texas in 1935 and is about a recent widow

who struggles to survive with two small children, has a farm to run, and very little money in the bank – not to mention a deadly tornado and the unwelcome presence of the Ku Klux Klan.

A motley crew of individuals, including her beautician sister, a blind boarder, and a wandering black man, step up to help her.

It would be a kind of a Hallmark type movie were it not for the last scene which all of the sudden makes it clear how deep the movie actually is.

The last scene takes place during a worship service, and during the time of communion, those who are present physically are joined by all the characters who have died, and those who have had conflicts with each other are sitting side by side, not only passing the bread and wine, but their heart-felt gift of forgiveness and grace.

It's a perfect depiction of what the communion of saints is –

not just us gathered physically together in this room, but us with the saints of every time and every place, where God's grace covers every difference, resolves every conflict, & heals every hurt inflicted or received.

That's of vital importance for us in two ways:

first in terms of our life as a community and in terms of our lives as individuals.

In terms of our lives as a community, what it means is that when we are in that spiritual space in which we each are connected with God and with God's will, all of our differences disappear, because it's no longer about what I want or you want, or the other person wants, but only about what God wants.

And if we are each in align with what God wants, we will necessarily be on the same page.

And in terms of our life as an individual, what that means is

that when we are in that spiritual space, in which we are connected to God, all the pains & pleasures, all of the failures & successes, all of the good & all of the bad fall away as we step into God's presence, see the love in God's face, and feel the embrace of God's arms.

That is the place where we find healing.

It may take only one divine embrace or it may take a year of daily hugs, but in God's arms we WILL find grace and mercy and healing.

And that's the context for understanding our second lesson for today, because what Paul is writing cannot be understood in a physical or material way; it can only be known when we are connected to God spiritually.

And when we are, then these words have incredible power:

"In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose... so that we...might live for the praise of his glory...."

You...were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit... the pledge of our inheritance...as God's own people...."

I pray that...God...may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know...the hope to which he has called you, ...the riches of his glorious inheritance...and...the immeasurable greatness of his power..."

Today, on this All Saints Sunday, the Spirit calls us to step out of time and space into God's holy presence, into the arms of the one to whom we belong, and in whom we will find all that we need and more than we can ever imagine. **Amen**