

Christ Church Episcopal, Harwich Port, MA
Sermon for All Saints Sunday, November 4, 2012

Wisdom 3:1-9; Revelation 21:1-6

John 11:32-44

The Rev. Dr. Judith Davis, Rector

Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful with the fire of your love. Send forth your spirit and we shall be created and you shall renew the face of the earth. Amen.

The *Wisdom of Solomon* says “The souls of the righteous are in the hand of God,” The *Revelation to John* says, “And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.”

Today we observe All Saints Sunday and in our church we pray for all the faithful departed since last All Saints Day. During the Reformation the Protestant churches understood "saints" in its New Testament usage as including all believers and reinterpreted the feast of All Saints as a celebration of the unity of the entire Church. And so today, we celebrate all the saints of God, the known and unknown, the famous and the infamous, our most loved relatives and those we weren't always sure we liked. I always remember those who have died as well, particularly as we read the names of all faithful departed since last All Saints Day.

The *Wisdom of Solomon* says, “The souls of the righteous are in the hands of God.” The lesson from the *Revelation to John* looks forward to the day when God will wipe away all tears. We read these words, “Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more . . . And the one who was seated on the throne said, ‘**See, I am making all things new.**’” In John's gospel, Jesus weeps along with Mary and all the gathered mourners before he demonstrates power over death by raising Lazarus to life.

On All Saints Day we celebrate the victory won for all the faithful dead, but we grieve for our beloved ones as well, knowing that God honors our tears. We bring our grief to the table and on this day, we are given an opportunity to remember “those we love but see no longer.” Each of us has lost someone we loved, whether in this year or earlier and the scriptures recognize this, too. We wanted Jesus to raise our loved ones back to life in this life to be with us, like he raised Lazarus, and it didn't happen for us. Jesus uses this story to foreshadow his own Resurrection from the dead, when God makes all things new and reminds us that those we loved will be raised in glory

as well. One theme of today is that line from Revelation, “See, I am making all things new.”

We renew our baptismal covenant on this day and we are reminded of the promises made at our baptism. We pray for all the saints and we are reminded of the example of the faithfulness of their lives. I am also reminded of those people who have been faithful parishioners here at Christ Church Episcopal in Harwich Port. Because of their generosity, we have this lovely church, a lovely memory garden, and great parishioners to share in the work of spreading the Gospel in our time and place.

As we interred Bev Winchell’s ashes last Saturday, and as I see her grave when I look at the memory garden, I am reminded of how much the saints of God have loved this parish. I am also reminded of the qualities of the saints of God: generosity, kindness, compassion, faithfulness, patience, hopefulness. I have buried too many people this year and too many before their time, as it were. I have stood at too many gravesides since last All Saints day, and especially this fall, and some days my own faith is tried in the deaths I deal with. I have known many of the faithful departed on our prayer list and I have conducted at least a dozen funerals of those listed there.

In the two Jewish funerals I conducted of Carolyn Hirshberg’s sons, I learned about the tradition of taking the shovel to add earth to the grave by turning the shovel over to make it more difficult, to be in some denial about the finality of it all, to have to focus on getting the shovelful of earth to the grave in this way. And Bev’s funeral is fresh in my mind as we put our shovelfuls of earth in the grave. In the burial office we

say, “all of us go down to the dust, yet even at the grave we make our song, ‘alleluia, alleluia, alleluia.’”



Why do we sing “alleluia” at the grave?-- Because we believe in the power of the Resurrection. Because we believe that Jesus has prepared a place for our loved ones and a place for us.

Because we commend our loved ones to God's care. Because we believe the souls of the righteous *are* in the hand of god. Because we believe in the Holy City, the New Jerusalem. Because we believe the Victory Lamb in the center of the throne, the one who was Jesus of Nazareth and is now the Christ in Glory, who will make all things new. Because we believe Jesus who said, "I am resurrection and I am life."

All of our belief does not take away the sting of death easily. But that's where this faithful community comes in. We can remind each other that we are God's beloved. We can remind each other to open our hearts that we may be a temple to be used for heaven and to be adorned with prayer and love and joy. This is the place where we catch occasionally a glimpse of that banquet in heaven where we will all praise God around God's throne forever. This is the place where we remember the beloved members of our community that we 'love but see no longer,' and this is the place where we can pour out our grief and love. It's also the place where we remember to carry on for the faithful ones who have served the community well. It's the place where we are reminded of our covenant to continue in the apostles teaching and fellowship in the prayers and the breaking of bread, where we promise to proclaim by word and example the good news of God in Christ, where we promise to respect the dignity of every human person, where we promise to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves, where we come together week after week to care for each other, to be strengthened for service, to be reminded that we belong in this beloved community of faith, and when our own faith is wavering, where we are held up by another pilgrim along life's way.

Bev Winchell and Dave Ward, Doris Cole and John Crowell, Ruth Morrison and Bob Snowden, my friends Mary Marguerite and Janice Robinson, Pat Lusk and Bina and Renato Beghé were all saints of God. The wider world didn't know all of them, but I did and I knew that they carried out the imperatives of the baptismal covenant, they respected the dignity of every human person, they proclaimed by word and example the good news, they continued in the apostles teaching and fellowship, the breaking of bread and the prayers and, I remember especially in the case of Mary Marguerite and Brenda that they sought Christ in all persons, even in the homeless man who came into their church and killed them. Their witness calls us to be saints of God as well.

What does it mean to believe in the power of the resurrection on this All Saints Day? Jesus told Mary, “Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?” And as I said, we are promised in the Revelation to John that “God will dwell with them as their God; and they will be his peoples, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more.”

When we pray for all those we love but see no longer, we remember that they are part of us and we are part of them and all of us are knit together, as the Collect says, as God’s elect. Remember on this All Saints’ Sunday that you are a saint of God as well. Go from this place and act like you are a saint, and practice being a saint of God. Open your heart to be God’s instrument of love, justice, reconciliation and joy in the world and be numbered among the elect, the saints of God.

Lord Christ, your saints have been the lights of the world in every generation: Grant that we who follow in their footsteps may be made worthy to enter with them into that heavenly country where you live and reign for ever and ever. Amen.

The painting on page 2 is a watercolor in the style of a medieval illuminated manuscript, showing the Lamb of Victory at the Resurrection. The words are from the Burial Office Commendation: “All of us go down to the dust; yet even at the grave we make our song: Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia.” (Painting © Judith Davis 2011, watercolor, 11” x 14”)