

Introduction to the Scripture:

The book of Revelation – written by John, but not the same John that wrote the Gospel of John – is, in general, an inspiration for Christians to remain faithful to God and Christ and to resist the powers of evil believing that God will prevail and bring salvation – that evil will be replaced by the goodness and peace of God’s kingdom. This passage in particular is a beautiful picture of what heaven might look like, and it’s often read at funerals.

After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying,

“Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!”

And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, singing,

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

Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, “Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?” I said to him, “Sir, you are the one that knows.” Then he said to me, “These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

*For this reason they are before the throne of God,
and worship him day and night within his temple,
and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them.
They will hunger no more, and thirst no more;
the sun will not strike them,
nor any scorching heat;
for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd,
and he will guide them to springs of the water of life,
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”*

Sermon: *All Saints - Saints All*

So yesterday was not only Halloween, but it was also an important day for Protestant churches such as ours. Oct. 31 is Reformation Day – the day Martin Luther spoke out against the corruption in his beloved Catholic Church (500 years ago) and began a movement that would inspire a whole new branch of the Christian Church. (Specifically, Lutheran for those who followed his particular teachings, and Protestant for those who were inspired by him and others who sought to reform the church at that time.)

As Protestants moved further and further away from the Roman Catholic Church, one of the elements that they left behind was the veneration, or the lifting up of the saints. And yet, one of the main themes of Luther’s writings and the reformation was a new understanding of sainthood

that I think mainline protestant churches such as our should hold on to. Often when I speak of saints in the congregational church, eyes glaze over or someone will remark, “The Catholics have saints; we don’t believe in them, do we?”

And while we don’t canonize saints formally the way the Roman Catholic Church does, we do acknowledge with Martin Luther that every Christian is at the same time, both saint and sinner.

Saints are a part of both our tradition and the current life of faith that we share as Christians today. And so today with Protestants and Catholics as close as down the street and as far as around the globe, we celebrate All Saints Day.

Which is a day on which Christ's people remember those who have gone before them in the faith and who now rest in the eternal presence of God promised to us, which we also call heaven. And we heard in our reading from Revelation, glimpses of heaven and of what the life of the saints is like there.

We see that there is a multitude that no one can count, a multitude from every nation, tribe, people, and language on earth, and that this multitude stands before the throne of God. And we also see clustered around the throne of God the elders and the angels and the four creatures of God, and they also, are praising God, saying:

Praise and glory and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God forever and forever – Amen.

And, not only is this a life of exuberant praise, but there, next to God, there is neither hunger, nor thirst, nor heat, nor pain anymore; and that God himself wipes the tears from their eyes, and that while God soothes them, Jesus, leads them to the springs of living water, joy and goodness.

In heaven there is no suffering, nor death, nor grief; all that has passed away, a new reality has come, a new and glorious life in which there is peace, and joy and praise; a life in which there is love and tenderness, serenity and exhilaration.

Elsewhere in the Bible we learn that this life to which our faith points, is for those who have tried to be faithful to God, those who have given of themselves in love, those who have named the name that is above every name.... Jesus, as Lord.

But don’t be fooled, because, no one - not even John who wrote this – can really tell us just how wonderful heaven is, or exactly what it feels like and looks like. And in the same way, no one can ever tell us that it does not exist.

You see, heaven is not something we know about, it’s something we believe in. And we believe, even as Protestants, that the saints are there, with God, especially the saints we remember today. So, who are these saints?

Well, they are people who by their actions and words have revealed the love of God to you. They are people, who strived in their own particular way to be faithful, and in their faithfulness, have touched your life and given you a special gift.

I have tried to do the impossible here - to describe for you in poor and inadequate words a little bit of what heaven is like, to get you thinking about heaven and about the saints you have known, saints who are now at God's side praising him, saints who were at one and the same time ordinary, and yet extraordinary people.

And I want to tell you specifically about two saints I've known.

Ellen Swenson, was a member of the church I served in Acton. You know the white collar I wear when I wear my robe to lead worship? Well, one Palm Sunday, she was going through the minister's line; she leaned forward and whispered in my ear, "Would you like me to take your collar home and clean it up for Easter Sunday?" And from that moment on she was the caretaker for my vestments. A few years later, Ellen got lung cancer. And in the year of her dying, she became a mentor and teacher to the congregation – teaching us how to live.

At that time there was a member of our church who was studying to be a pastor. Ellen invited this person in to her home regularly so that she could learn how to minister to a dying person, so that when she became a pastor, she'd have experienced this profound, unique, and special ministry.

Ellen was an everyday saint.

Then there's my Dad, who died from ALS 19 years ago. In the last years of my dad's life, my brother, his son was estranged from the family – his last interactions with us were filled with anger with no foreseeable hope of reconciliation. When dad was diagnosed, I called Greg and asked him to come home – he never did. The day dad died, he said to me, "As for Greg, I have nothing but love for my son; I forgive him." The peace of heart which came over my father enabling him to forgive and love like that amazes me, and can only be the peace of Christ.

Both Ellen and my dad were saints to me; they were faithful to God and they lived out the gospel as best they could.

Who do you remember? Who showed you a bit of what God is like? Who sought to love their neighbors, and to love God? But you know, while the purpose of All Saints day is to remember those who have died in the faith; as good Protestants we must also open our eyes and hearts to see **the saints among us right now.**

If Martin Luther was right and I believe he was, then everyone is a sinner (making mistakes, missing the mark) and yet at the same time – a saint! To be an everyday saint means to love God, and to strive to love your neighbors as yourself. Saints living today (as well as those who've gone before) seek to be faithful to Jesus Christ. Saints today are worth imitating because of how they love God and how they lead their lives.

They are not perfect people. Even the most famous saints, those men and women the church as a whole points to, the Mother Theresa's of the world, were never perfect. Even the saints of the Bible were deeply flawed: Saint Peter was inconsistent, and lied about being Jesus' friend. Saint Paul at times seemed a little arrogant. Saints James and John wanted all the honor and glory for themselves.

All the saints had feet of clay, but still their lives are worth imitating and at the very least, remembering. Saints are people who make a difference to others because they try to love and serve God, and to love and serve God's world.

And the list of living saints that comes to my mind is lengthy!

There's the family who had me for Christmas Eve dinner in my first years as a pastor. I was young and single and living across the country from my family. Anne and John arranged their entire family dinner around my schedule so that I could have a nice dinner and get back to the church in time for the next service I had to lead.

There's my colleague Joyce, who after breaking free of her abusive husband, started a non-profit to help other women in abusive and controlling relationships.

There's Hilary, who keeps a list of people to pray for taped to her treadmill.

There's my friend Leigh, who in the face of monumental adversity - homelessness, addiction, grief, illness - remains steadfast in hope and faith that God will provide for him.

Each of these saints in some way directs me to God, they reveal that God has made a difference to them. And because of **their** faith, **my** faith is strengthened. They make a difference in my life.

That is what being a saint is all about - making a difference - a positive difference, a loving difference, the kind of difference that inclines the hearts and minds of others to God and his praise.

Each one of us, is called to be a saint, and, I believe, each one of us, because of the love of Jesus Christ, **can** be a saint. At times it can be difficult to live up to this calling: at times it is hard to love, at times it is hard to do things that shows God's care, at times it is hard even to have faith.

And that is where the saints come in. Our saints, the ones in our daily lives, are our encouragement. We learn how to live and how to believe, by watching how **they** live and how **they** believe. And we can take strength from the saints who are gathered around God's throne; and in that strength - as the church has always intended by naming the saints - we can then go on to imitate them; to copy in our behavior and attitudes those things which cause us to name them as special and holy, to us and to God.

Because, we **are** all saints, even as we celebrate... all the saints.
Amen.