

ALL SAINTS' DAY

Year B

This Bible study was written by the Rev. Warren Thomas Swenson for All Saints' Day (B) in 2018.

Wisdom of Solomon 3:1-9

3 But the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and no torment will ever touch them. ²In the eyes of the foolish they seemed to have died, and their departure was thought to be a disaster ³and their going from us to be their destruction, but they are at peace. ⁴For though in the sight of others they were punished, their hope is full of immortality. ⁵Having been disciplined a little, they will receive great good, because God tested them and found them worthy of himself; ⁶like gold in the furnace he tried them, and like a sacrificial burnt offering he accepted them. ⁷In the time of their visitation they will shine forth and will run like sparks through the stubble. ⁸They will govern nations and rule over peoples, and the Lord will reign over them forever. ⁹Those who trust in him will understand truth, and the faithful will abide with him in love, because grace and mercy are upon his holy ones, and he watches over his elect.

Commentary from Warren Swenson

When the Church comes together to celebrate the Feast of All Saints, I often imagine us as a family gathered at the cemetery to honor a cherished relative. Just as on Memorial Day we visit grandpa's final resting place, on this day we celebrate those whom the Church recognizes as particularly notable examples of life in Christ. If on this holy day we gather at the grave of the saints at rest, then this reading from the wisdom literature is the epitaph on the headstone that lies before us. Contained within it is our Christian hope. The hope of eternal life stretches back even to the forebears of our Christian tradition, and for centuries that promise has been inscribed in our most sacred texts. It is such a promise that beckons us to this holy occasion.

Discussion Questions

What particular saints have influenced your Christian experience?

How does this feast connect you with those saints and with the entire communion of saints?

Psalm 24

- ¹ The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, *
the world and all who dwell therein.
- ² For it is he who founded it upon the seas *
and made it firm upon the rivers of the deep.
- ³ "Who can ascend the hill of the Lord? *
and who can stand in his holy place?"
- ⁴ "Those who have clean hands and a pure heart, *
who have not pledged themselves to
falsehood,
nor sworn by what is a fraud.
- ⁵ They shall receive a blessing from the Lord *
and a just reward from the God of their
salvation."
- ⁶ Such is the generation of those who seek him, *
of those who seek your face, O God of Jacob.
- ⁷ Lift up your heads, O gates;
lift them high, O everlasting doors; *
and the King of glory shall come in.
- ⁸ "Who is this King of glory?" *
"The Lord, strong and mighty,
the Lord, mighty in battle."
- ⁹ Lift up your heads, O gates;
lift them high, O everlasting doors; *
and the King of glory shall come in.
- ¹⁰ "Who is he, this King of glory?" *
"The Lord of hosts,
he is the King of glory."

Commentary from Warren Swenson

Today the psalmist's prayer involves a holy wondering: "Who can ascend the hill of the Lord? And who can stand in his holy place?" One answer is immediately given: "Those who have clean hands and a pure heart, who have not pledged themselves to falsehood, nor sworn by what is a fraud." It's easy to see why we read this on All Saints'. These with clean hands and pure hearts are the very saints of our tradition. These are they who have been blessed by the Lord and received their reward at the saving hands of God. The saints remain our blessed models for life on earth, but they are also our advocates in heaven. The opening lines of this psalm remind us that God created the earth, but remember that Genesis tells us that God created the heavens as well. The saints remain examples for us on earth as they dwell in heaven with the God who is the source of both our existence and our final reward, our present reality and our salvation.

Discussion Questions

How do the saints connect us not only to an earthy model of life in Christ, but also to a heavenly one?

Do you know anyone who in thought, word, and deed points you toward a heavenly reality? How do they do that?

Revelation 21:1-6a

21 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. ² And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

“See, the home of God is among mortals.
He will dwell with them;
they will be his peoples,
and God himself will be with them and be
their God;
⁴ 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.”

⁵ 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.” ⁶ Then he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End.

Commentary from Warren Swenson

This passage encourages us, as the book of Revelation so often does, to use our imaginations in ways that might be foreign to us. After all, imagination is not just kids' stuff! Amidst what can be the dullness of our daily lives, we often let practicalities rule our hearts, but for the writer of this text, imagination is a blessed escape. Belief in the New Jerusalem was widespread in biblical times. As one who was experiencing the atrocities of Roman rule, the writer likely had no other outlet to process the pains of an oppressed life. By entering the world of the writer's imagination, we not only catch a glimpse of the writer's imaginative escape—a heavenly city descending from above—but we are reminded of the importance of our own images for a better future. These images might consist of a renewed commitment to civil discourse in our country, a world without homelessness, or a society with affordable health care for all people. But our imaginations are not just limited to the things of this world; they can also explore the world to come. So linger in your imagination with this passage and with the communion of saints wondering about a promise that is, at least to us, yet to be revealed.

Discussion Questions

Do you ever use your imagination? How does it increase your faith?

Although we may not be oppressed in the same ways as our ancient counterparts, how can faithful imagination be a healthy escape for our daily struggles?

John 11:32-44

³²When 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.” ³³When Jesus saw her weeping and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. ³⁴He said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” ³⁵Jesus began to weep. ³⁶So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” ³⁷But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?”

³⁸Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. ³⁹Jesus 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.” ⁴⁰Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?” ⁴¹So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, “Father, I thank you for having heard me. ⁴²I 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.” ⁴³When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” ⁴⁴The 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.”

Commentary from Warren Swenson

Jesus is moved to tears. In a display of his full humanity, Jesus grieves the loss of his friend, Lazarus. To make matters worse, in the middle of his grief, Jesus is flooded with questions, perhaps accusations, that he could have saved him. That has to hurt. Jesus proceeds, still deeply grieved, to resurrect Lazarus and in so doing renews the faith of Mary, Martha, and the other members of the crowd. The passage is especially pertinent at the celebration of All Saints’ not because it deals with death, but because it is a passage that epitomizes eternal life, the promise that God has made through Christ to each of us. Jesus says, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” The faith of Jesus’ followers was rewarded in this miraculous event. We may never have seen anyone raised from the dead, but there are other ways that we experience the glory of God: a child’s birth and baptism, the unconditional love of our families, friends, and neighbors, and most of all, through participation in the Eucharist.

Discussion Questions

When has God’s glory been revealed to you? Was it a large “aha” moment or a still, small whisper in the night?

How is God’s glory manifested in the remembrance of the lives of the saints? How do you know?