

Message
October 31, and November 1, 2009
Revelation 21:1-16; John 11:32-44
All Saint's Day
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We celebrate All Saint's by remembering especially those who have gone before us into God's nearer presence over the past year. You heard the names of some of these precious saints at the beginning of worship. And, for most of us, I imagine there are so many more on our hearts whose names quietly rest on our lips; those loved ones who we so miss. As well, today, we remember that saints are those hundreds of thousands among us who follow and love to do Jesus' will; those people who understand truth; those who, are bound closely to God in love; people who are holy; those who are intentional about belonging to Jesus Christ; those who dedicate their life to the service of God; our family in Christ.

We also celebrate All Saints Day with thanksgiving for the new life brought to us in baptism. We give thanks for how we're blessed with the presence of children who make us smile and even laugh, as happens a lot here with Christ Church. So, this morning, we'll give thanks that we die to our old life and are born into the fullness of new life, where we're loved and live eternally in Christ as we welcome the newest saints, Eli, Lucas, Lucy, Madison, Robbie and Kale into Christ's body through the sacramental waters of Baptism. Speaking on behalf of the newest saints, we'll promise to believe in a mighty God, a God who comes and shares with us in our humanness as Jesus Christ; a God whose Spirit is forever constant in our lives with the promise of love and forgiveness. We'll remember those same promises made for us in our own baptism; that with God's help, we'll do all in our power to live as Christ calls us to live.

This is how it is with Jesus and this gift of life he gives us; life that one moment is joyful and filled with such pleasure and delight and the next moment plunging into despair. A life that just doesn't always make sense. And yet, somehow in all the living and dying, Jesus asks us to *believe* in *how* he incorporates us into his kingdom. This day is, for many of us, a bittersweet time. It's tempting, when grieving over those lost, to get stuck there, and hide in the mercifully darkened tomb for solace. But, then we're given the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead; a story much more about living than dying. It's a pivotal story in the life of Jesus as he turns back to Jerusalem to face his own death; all the while asking of us, "Do you believe?" Do we believe that in death we're brought to new life in Christ?

We live with a fear of death. Death is that absolute. And, for many of us, my guess is it's more the unknown of death that promotes fear than death itself. We will go to great lengths to avoid death. A friend told me the other day that this past year in the United States, we spent \$12 million in cosmetic surgery. Martha and Mary have a very human fear we can all relate to: they're afraid of losing their brother. They don't want to think the worst and face the fact that he might die. Maybe that's why Mary and Martha, when they send the message to Jesus that Lazarus is ill, they don't ask him to come. Maybe

they're avoiding their worst fear. Death is that part of us that we just don't want to talk about or deal with; too many unknowns.

Arriving at the home of Mary and Martha, Jesus, perhaps more human than any where else in scripture, in seeing the anguish of his beloved friends, breaks down and weeps. That's what friends do. We enter right into those places with our loved ones and console and grieve right along with them. Jesus takes it further. He prays to God that they will believe. That, in him, they will come to know that death is not the end. "I am the resurrection," says Jesus, "anyone who believes in me, even though that person dies, will live, and whoever lives and believes in me, will never die." *It's in death that we're given new ground rules for believing.*

Believing doesn't mean we don't stumble on rocky roads, or that we don't question and doubt. Believing doesn't mean the mess and sloppiness goes away. Believing does mean we can make sense of the suffering.

We can't avoid the painful, sorrowful agony of death. Death does come and in it, we weep and wail and mourn and grieve.

Martha, the busy, hurried Martha, always quick to criticize and slow to rest, wants an explanation. "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." But, at the same time, it's Martha, faithful in Christ, in all the turmoil, who lives with hope, and confesses, "even now I know that God will grant whatever you ask of him." And Mary, she too wants a fix, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." But, in the end, it's quiet, obedient Mary, who humbly sits at the feet of Jesus, anointing his feet, wiping them with her hair, who is grateful for his saving grace. Sometimes it's scary believing in Jesus. Writer Brennan Manning reminds us that, "often trust begins on the far side of despair." When we've exhausted all our resources, relinquished all our control, stopped making deals with God, then we say, "I believe." Jesus, sighing, tears running down his face, with Mary and Martha in tow, they go to the tomb. He offers up thankful praise, a plea that all will believe, and cries out in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out." That's how it is with Jesus; our intimate, tender, compassionate friend, Jesus. He comes to save and calls each and every one of us by name: Greg, Nancy, Curt, Keith, Terri, Scott, Robin, Pauline, Caroline, Sam, Carol, Joe, Vicki, one after the other, "come out." And, like Lazarus, we emerge stumbling from the darkness, into the light. We step out leaving behind those parts of us that can live no longer; those parts that bind us up and keep us in darkness. In Jesus the misery that imprisons us in death is stripped away. We're made free of the shadows of death. Believe in me, he says, and come out to a new life, eternal life in our living and our dying.

Do you believe? Jesus asks.

Just days later Jesus will journey to his own death, carrying the cross of our burdens, our sins; those very pieces of our human brokenness that bring death. He'll bear that pain and suffering, dying for us, only to emerge from the darkened tomb, victorious, resurrected, with the promise of new life, an eternal life lived in the glory of God, for us, for all those who have gone before us, and for all those who come after.

Believe in me, he says, and come out to a new life. A life of promise and hope.

And, that's what saints are about. It's not about their dying, it's about their living. Their living in the belief that the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ saves us from death and brings us peace, and love and mercy. My father was one of those saints for me. He was by no means a perfect man. He worked too much, so we didn't see him a lot. And, when he was home, sometimes football was more important than getting to the dinner table. But I never doubted his love for me, and later his love for my husband Freddie, despite his concerns that Freddie and I were both far too young to marry. Here's how he taught me to believe: he was faithful in practice. We never missed church. He always served, as a worship leader, where he sang too loud; as a Sunday School teacher, as head of Sunday School, as an elder on the parish leadership team. After his death I explored daddy's library. Shelves are lined with books written by Bonhoeffer, Barth, Tillich, C.S. Lewis, all the classic faith favorites. He's underlined and written notes and asked questions, like, "what happens when I die?" "What do you want of me, God?" "How do I obey?" This was and is a beautiful model of faith for me: to question, to keep questioning, but also to keep believing and keep loving. There are lot of words that daddy and I never spoke. That's ok. Because, what I know now and will know forever, is what holy times we shared and how in his love for me, I came to believe...to believe that even in death, the glory of God is made known, through the abundant love and forgiveness of Jesus Christ.

Daddy rests now with all the saints, the biggies, like, Francis, and Joan, and Augustine, and Bernard, and Columba and Teresa, and the not so great, but who are dear to us. And, I believe, with all my heart,...I believe that, with Jesus, they're smiling down upon us, and giving thanks that their lives helped to usher in belief for each and every one of us.

Saints are our mothers and our fathers, our sisters and brothers, our sons and daughters, our friends and colleagues. Those people who *helped* us come to Jesus; and who *help* us come to Jesus; those people who live with belief in a Jesus who wipes away our tears, and promises an end to sadness and pain; who make Christ their home and fix their gaze upon his brilliance; who because of Jesus in their life, are nearer to God than they are to themselves; those people who confront death; who believe and show us how to believe, as Jesus calls us to believe, that death is not the answer. Believing is the answer. Believing that in Christ Jesus, we break free from the darkness of the tomb. We are not tomb people. We are emerging people, in the love of Jesus Christ. People like, Mary and Martha and Lazarus who in their living and their dying, say "yes" to believing in Jesus Christ and are made free in eternal life.

Jesus asks, "Do you believe?" Do we believe that Jesus, in his life, death and resurrection, calls us to come out of the darkness of fear, the darkness of death, unbinds us to be free in his glory? Free to be alive, reborn in his grace and mercy. This is his promise for us. To be his very holy people, his saints. Jesus cries out for us, "come out...unbind yourselves." Believe in me. Be set free by me.

And now we celebrate as he brings our newest saints into this hope-filled life through baptism...