

All Saints Sunday: "Our Hope"
Isaiah 25:6-9; John 11:32-44; Revelation 21:1-6, 23-24; 22:5, 12, 20
Salem United Methodist Church
November 1, 2015
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All Hallow's Eve is the religious term for what we currently call Halloween. Sometimes it has been called All Saints' Eve. At sundown of October 31, the church traditionally remembered all those who have gone before us to their heavenly reward. Instead of giving candy to costumed children, the church held a prayer vigil. Sometimes Christians gathered at their loved ones graves lighting candles or lanterns. They gathered to remember their loved ones and also to commit themselves to be more faithful followers of Jesus. Then as the sun rose on November 1, All Saints Day, they celebrated with the breaking of bread, the Communion of Saints, which is a community made up of all past, present, and future Christians. Participating in this community is our hope for today and tomorrow.

Here are some scenarios that many of us have experienced. There's an unexpected knock at the door. The person knocking has some bad news that will change our lives forever. Or the phone rings and we know by the tone of the voice on the other end that something dreadful has happened. Or we've been asked to make a special appointment with the doctor. We know in our gut that the test results will not be what we want to hear. At Halloween we tell horror stories, but these scenarios are life's real horror stories. Our nightmares become our reality. Here's another scenario, we may have sat by the bedside of a loved one every night and day for weeks on end. We have denied the fact that their bodies are growing weaker even when the doctor tells us that the person is dying. But we wait with them, sharing memories, reconciling where needed, tending to our loved one, holding hands, and praying. Then while everyone in the room is talking, or perhaps while we fall asleep in the chair from exhaustion, a stark silence fills the room. The silence is the signal that our loved one has stepped into their new reality, the everlasting arms of our living God. With each of these scenarios, we suffer a loss and our grieving begins.

Mary and Martha's horror story is similar to ours. Their new reality was the death of their brother, Lazarus. When he became ill they called for Jesus to come and heal him. Mary and Martha knew how Jesus healed the blind, the lame, and the ill. Jesus was their hope, but he doesn't come until it is too late. Their brother has been dead for four days. You can sense the disappointment in Mary's voice, "Lord, if you had been here..." Her hope has died with her brother. Her deep grieve has troubled Jesus and he weeps. Scholars throughout the ages have debated as to why Jesus wept. After all, didn't Jesus know that he had the power to raise Lazarus from the dead? Wasn't this the reason why he stayed away until Lazarus had died? Didn't he stay away so he could show the people that he is the Resurrection and Life? So, why the tears? Why was he not rejoicing in the fact that he held the power over death? Or did Jesus cry because he felt the loss and grief of his dear friends? Or did Lazarus death remind him of his own death and resurrection? Was he crying for his friends or for himself? Or was Jesus crying for Lazarus who he would raise from the dead? Lazarus was already experiencing his eternal life. To call him back meant that Lazarus would have to experience death all over again some day. We may never know exactly why Jesus wept. Did Jesus who was fully divine and fully human experience our human pain? I believe so. Jesus feels our pain even though he knows that there is more to life than the suffering we experience in this life. When talking to Martha Jesus promises her that Lazarus would rise from the dead and he says, "I am the Resurrection and the Life. Whoever believes in me will live, even though they die. Everyone who lives and believes in me will never die." Today we cling to these words when a loved one dies. They are stated at almost every Christian funeral. These words of Jesus offer hope that our life does not end.

Today we remember those who have died their physical death. Our hope is that they are experiencing the joy of the Resurrection. Our loved ones have become part of the great cloud of witnesses. They surround us, cheer us on, and go with us on the journey of our lives. The cloud of witnesses is made up of both the well-known heroes of our faith and the lesser known Christians. Our faith tradition includes them and us as part of the Communion of Saints. We state in the Apostles' Creed that we believe in this Communion of Saints. Our departed loved ones along with the Apostles, those martyred for their faith, and all the faithful through the ages are the saints of our past. We are the saints of the present. And those who will receive the faith are the future saints. Together the past, present, and future saints are united in the Communion of Saints. When I think of the Communion of Saints, I think of the bond of grace that unites those of us who are alive and with those who have preceded us into their heavenly life. When I think of the Communion of Saints, I think of people who have sat in these pews and who have received their heavenly reward. I think of Dick and Clyde, Alice and Betty, Les and Warren, Flo and Bobbie, Ruby and Grace, Gene and Matt, Ruth and Jean, Hazel, Evelyn, and Gladys, Frieda and Jane. Can you visualize them sitting among us? Who do you think of when you think of the Communion of Saints?

Our Communion liturgy claims our unity with them as we praise the name of God with "all the company of heaven and join their unending hymn." Whenever we gather at the Lord's Table, we affirm the presence of all the company of heaven. They are not dead, but surround the throne of God singing praises and feasting at the heavenly banquet. Whenever we come to eat from this Communion Table, we join with them in the anticipation that one day we all will one day be feasting together in the city of God where there is no more pain and no more crying. That will be the party of all parties! What a glorious day that will be! In today's communion liturgy we will pray for the renewal of our communion with all God's saints and then we will mention the name of each who has received their resurrection this past year.

Why do we call this day, "All Saints?" We may think of saints, those very holy people who are canonized by the Catholic Church. However, the word, saint, comes from the Latin term, *sanctus*, which means holy or sacred. We are all on this journey of being made holy. It is God's glorifying grace that continually perfects us and remakes us in God's love. The saints are people like you and me. The exception is that God isn't finished with us yet. God is still working on us and expecting us to continue to work for peace and justice in this world. We are not to sit and wait, but to pray and put legs to those prayers so God's kingdom can exist on earth as well as in heaven. All Saints Day then becomes a day of recommitment as well for those of us who are still living. So we can be the saints in our schools, at home, at work, or in the world.

Jesus said, "I am the Resurrection and the Life." That is our hope. We do not need to fear death. It is a passing from this life to the next. Jesus has showed us the way. We are not called to just sit and wait until we called to our heavenly home. We are called to be faithful, called to live a holy life, called to follow Jesus in all we think, say, and do. This is the how God's grace turns all of us into the saints of the church.

Almighty God, you have knit together your elect in one communion and fellowship in the mystical body of your son Christ our Lord: Give us grace so to follow your blessed saints in all virtuous and godly living, that we may come to those inexpressible joys that you have prepared for those who truly love you; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, in glory everlasting. Amen.

