

November 1, 2020
All Saints' Sunday—Year A
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Revelation 7:9-17
Psalm 34:1-10, 22
1 John 3:1-3
Matthew 5:1-12

Where in the world should I begin today? There is a lot going on.

For so many reasons, anxious uncertainty is the rule of the day. I expect that you know the current litany of concern, but I should say it out loud. COVID-19 has surged around the country, and it's on the rise here in Connecticut. That's happening on top of seven and a half months of isolation, on top of so much death and illness. The economy is a mess; people are going hungry. In a sort of sustained geographical one-two punch, wildfires have continued to consume the west while hurricanes bash the southeast. White supremacists are shockingly emboldened. The national political scene is so ugly that all you needed for a Halloween scare was to turn on the news. It seems like we just sprang forward, but the clocks fell back last night. That marks the beginning of the season of long nights, which, for those who suffer during it, is likely to be especially tough this year.

It's been three weeks since I last preached. These days, three weeks might as well be no time, or it might be forever. The coronavirus pandemic has necessitated the creation of a whole new lexicon for our whole new experience. Here's one entry: Blursday. Blursday is what you call any day of the week when all the days of the week blur together. Blursday works for many of my days, but I know one thing for sure: Election Day is in two days. We're all eager for it to be over, but we don't actually know when it will be over.

All those ingredients, shaken and stirred, have made my brain too restless for its own good. Buddhists use the term "monkey mind" to describe the challenges of trying to sit still for meditation when it feels like a small primate is swinging across the synapses between neurons. For night-time agitation, you might prefer the descriptor "hamster brain." Like real hamsters, the ghostly ones sleep during the day and wake up at bedtime, when they hop on the wheel and don't stop running. I had a pet hamster when I was five or six years old, and my ghost hamster's wheel squeaks just like Pepe's did.

The litany of concern I started with didn't even include the more usual life events that so many of us have faced over the last many months. Add it all up, and it's a lot. Some of us are managing better than others, but I expect we're all struggling to one degree or another. We're worried; we're grieving; we're exhausted.

We Christians turn to our faith. But even that isn't necessarily helpful right now. Maybe the spiritual practices that once helped just aren't working right now. Maybe anything we consider trying feels like just another energy drain. In such circumstances, it helps to be Episcopalian. In the Episcopal Church, there are some things that simply show up if we simply show up. In that category today is our liturgical calendar giving us All Saints' Day.

On that subject, I'll begin with a few words about today's Gospel reading from Matthew, which is the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount. There's a lot more to the Sermon on the Mount, and we heard much of it over the summer. This part, the beatitudes, gets saved for All Saints' Day. An entire sermon could be written about each of the nine beatitudes. Today, I want to focus on one aspect of this reading, something we've touched on as we discussed other parts of the Sermon on the Mount. It's this: the idea that the kingdom of heaven is already here, if not yet in all its fullness.

There is interplay between present and future right up front, as Matthew sets up the story. Jesus is talking to his disciples, but later it's clear that others overhear; Jesus is describing the marks of an existing discipleship into which others will be invited. More fundamentally, each beatitude includes an element of the *present*, and an element of the *future*: those disciples are blessed *right now*, because they *will be* part of that fully realized kingdom. Being called to live the life of discipleship that Jesus describes in the beatitudes is to be blessed, even if the end result remains obscure. Let's look more closely at that first beatitude. It says: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Matthew here includes the literal poor, and also the metaphorical poor—those who know that their only true wealth and safety rests in God. That's the starting point for all that follows.

We are the inheritors of the Gospel: you might say that we overheard that Sermon on the Mount, and therefore we too are following in the footsteps of Jesus. Like those first disciples, we *are now*, so that we *will be*. On All Saints' Day, we say it this way: we are part of the communion of saints past, present, and future. Some came before us, some journey with us, and some will come after us. This week, as I prepared for All Saints' Day, all this reminded me to think long-term. The kingdom of heaven is here, right now, but it's still in process. Maybe, as we remember the trails and adversities overcome by saints past, we can find encouragement and strength for the trails and adversities that yet lie ahead.

To help us do that, during the Prayers of the People, as we do every year, I will read the names of the dearly departed saints that we wanted to remember today. We are all saints, but the Episcopal Church recognizes some people as particularly noteworthy, and I want to consider some of them, using an updated version of a PowerPoint presentation that I first did back in 2004 for a seminary class. It's a slide-show version of the Litany of the Saints. If you're Roman Catholic, you know about praying the Litany of the Saints: It would go something like: Saint Mary, pray for us; Saint Michael, pray for us; Saint Gabriel, pray for us; and so forth. Some Episcopal churches of the Anglo-Catholic variety also pray the Litany of the Saints.

I did the slide show after I'd been studying the question of whether Anglicans are "allowed" to pray to saints. I actually could find very little on that question.

Here's a quote from the 39 Articles of Religion, a foundational document of the Anglicanism. This is one of the few things in the tradition that directly addresses praying to saints. [*first slide*]

The Romish Doctrine concerning Purgatory, Pardons, Worshipping and Adoration, as well of Images as of Relics, and also Invocation of Saints, is a fond thing, vainly invented, and grounded upon no warranty of Scripture, but rather repugnant to the Word of God.

–*The Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion (1553)*

The Anglo-Catholics don't necessarily agree with that. Those of us who pray to St. Anthony to help us find something lost might also disagree. Here's another quote, one of the very few things I could find addressing this, from a more recent source, the Rev. Margaret Gunther, an Episcopal priest. *[second slide]*

Prayers of intercession move us beyond ourselves into community Pushed back to its Latin roots (*intercedere*), the word simply means “to stand between” or “to stand in the midst.” When we intercede, whether in prayer or in everyday life, we place ourselves before authority on behalf of another. It is no surprise that Mary has been invoked as intercessor over the centuries; what mother has not, perhaps wrongheadedly and irrationally, interceded on behalf of her child with an irate father, an exasperated classroom teacher, or the parole board of the state prison? Mary and her kindly (and apocryphal) mother Anne can be counted on to intercede for the least worthy among us.”

–The Rev. Margaret Guenther (1998)

I'm not necessarily suggesting that we all start praying to saints, but maybe you want to, maybe you feel a need for that, maybe you don't. But I do also think that the idea of entering into the communion of saints in a deeper way can be helpful to us.

In the slide show, you'll see the name of the saint at the top of the slide and at the bottom “pray for us” in brackets, as optional. As we go through it, maybe you want to add those words in your mind. I'm not going to say anything—I'm going to ring a bell as the slides change, but I'm not going to say anything, to allow some silence for you to enter into this. You can add the words “pray for us” if you feel called to; don't need to, most Anglicans wouldn't do that. The idea really is to enter into the rhythm of it.

You'll notice that the images on the slides are reminiscent of icons in orthodox theology. Icons are sometimes called in orthodox theology “windows into heaven,” and often the subjects of an icon are looking directly at the viewer, and the idea is that through them you're looking into the mystical beyond.

However it works for you, maybe this is helpful to you to remember that we are part of the communion of saints, and that we're part God's long game—we're blessed now, we're blessed even when the kingdom seems especially far away, perhaps we're especially blessed when the kingdom seems especially far away. Regardless of what happens next week, God's kingdom comes.

[start slide show]