

November 7, 2021  
All Saints', Year B  
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert  
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Isaiah 25:6-9  
Psalm 24  
Revelation 21:1-6a  
John 11:32-44

Today we are observing the Feast of All Saints. While many churches observe All Saints' Day on the Sunday following, the assigned date is of course November 1. Traditionally, a church "day" runs the 24 hours from the evening before to the evening of. By that measure, All Saints' Day begins on Halloween night. This year we happened to mark that beginning with an All Hallows' Eve service last Sunday.

It was truly lovely, thanks to Emma, Madeleine, and a gaggle of other young adults from the area, and thanks also to the good fortune of a beautiful evening to be outside. Sometimes something mysterious happens when you sit in the dark with only the warmth of a gentle fire and the illumination of candles. The universe both contracts to the circle of faces lit by that natural light, and expands to the ceiling of stars overhead.

Maybe it was the assembled company. Maybe it was the liturgy. Maybe the church lawn had become a thin place. Or maybe it was just my imagination running wild on Halloween night. Whatever the reason, I felt like we were joined by legions of others. The best I can describe it is as a sense of ethereal bodies floating above us, the swirling company of the dead. It wasn't alarming; they weren't demanding; they were simply *present*. And I kept thinking about the multitudes dead of COVID-19.

And so on Monday morning I researched some pandemic death statistics. The numbers may have been revised slightly since first publication, and I'm rounding them off so you can more easily digest them, but you'll get the drift. Here goes:

- The number of COVID-19 deaths in the United States as of November 1, 2020—which is to say, All Saints' Day of last year—was 231, 000.<sup>1</sup>
- On November 1, 2021, it was 747,000.<sup>2</sup>

I also happened upon an article in that day's *New York Times*. It had this headline: "The official *global* virus death toll has passed *five million* [emphasis added]." This took me aback, because I hadn't realized that milestone was coming. It's hard to comprehend the scale of death, but the article offered some comparisons: "Such a loss would wipe out almost the entire population of Melbourne, Australia, or most of the nation of Singapore." It also included a grim reminder: "Experts say that five million is an undercount."<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps as an antidote, I then searched for poems for All Saints' Day. I found one gloomy poem on poets.org that includes references to Saint Joan of Arc and St. Rose of Lima.<sup>4</sup> It reminded me of the book of saints that was in my Roman Catholic home in Louisiana when I was growing up. As a girl, I would pore over it. Decades later, while visiting my parents, I thought of that book and asked my mother if it was still around. She went to the coat closet where the vacuum cleaner was stored and pulled it down from the shelf at the top. I thumbed through it and quickly noticed that each saint was listed with a name and a very short description. For woman saint after woman saint, that description was "Virgin and Martyr." I flashed back to the message that I internalized as a child: that the only way to be a "good girl" was to be virgin and martyr. And I quickly put that book right back into the closet. At least I didn't have to go back in.

Returning to this past Monday, I couldn't remember the story of St. Rose of Lima, so I looked her up. She's the patron saint of Peru, born in 1586. Her biographies emphasize her extreme acts of penance. She's depicted wearing a crown of roses, but let me read one approving description of what she actually wore and some of her other penitential practices:

Rose often wore on her head a circlet of silver, studded on the inside with sharp points, in memory of the Lord's crown of thorns. Other forms of penitence which she inflicted on her body were floggings, administered three times daily; the wearing of a hair shirt; and the dragging of a heavy, wooden cross about the garden. She rubbed her lips with gall and often chewed bitter herbs to deaden the sense of taste. Both eating and sleeping were reduced to a minimum. Naturally, her health was affected, but the physical disorders which resulted from this regime—stomach ailments, asthma, rheumatism, and fevers—were suffered uncomplainingly.

Hence it comes as no particular surprise that Rose died at age 31.

Rose of Lima undoubtedly inspires many people. What she stirs in me is mostly an old morbid fascination on which I would rather not linger. Still, it occurs to me that much of what we share about the lives of the saints borders on the grotesque. We just sang about the saints of God that "one was slain by a fierce wild beast"<sup>5</sup>—and, as when a church full of the Day School children belt out that line, it's fun! That's pretty grotesque.

*Grotesque* is the word that occurred to me, and so I looked it up. According to Merriam-Webster, the noun *grotesque* is "a style of decorative art characterized by fanciful or fantastic human and animal forms often interwoven with foliage or similar figures that may distort the natural into absurdity, ugliness, or caricature." The adjective *grotesque* means "fanciful," "bizarre," "absurdly incongruous," or "departing markedly from the natural, the expected, or the typical."<sup>6</sup>

I don't like being scared, so I never liked haunted houses, and I don't watch horror films. But maybe Halloween allows us to glance safely at an artificial grotesque, which then serves as a sort of inoculation to the real grotesque that necessarily comes our way. The grotesque *will* manifest in us, in those we love, in those around us. Our reaction can't be to just look away. We might need a breather sometimes, but looking away can't be our permanent posture. We have to be able to offer our bodily presence, to help as we can, and to witness that grotesque is not who we are, that grotesque is not where God leaves us.

This may not be quite the message you expected to hear on the festive occasion of a major feast day, or on the festive occasion of our reoccupation of this space. Let me say it clearly: the last time we worshipped in this building was almost exactly twenty months ago, on March 8, 2020. It is such a relief to be back. Beneath that relief, my feelings are mixed, and maybe yours are, too. There's joy in the present and hope for the future. But there's also grief, because we haven't finished mourning the losses of the last twenty months. And there's also uncertainty, because we haven't finished negotiating the changes that are still coming our way. We haven't even fully taken in the massive scale of it all. It's nearly too grotesque to look upon. But we have to, and we will, and we don't have to do it alone. I like to think that *we* are now better positioned to do so, with more sustenance from our worship and more support from one another.

With that we return us to the communion of saints. For many of us, the Christian tradition did a great job of telling us we're sinners, and a poor job of telling us we're saints. We *are* saints. We will never measure up to St. Rose of Lima, but that's not the point. Instead, let's instead ponder this: the sinner–saint binary is one of the many that still needs to be fully queered. Sinners, yes, and also saints, saint in the company of saints here and beyond, past, present, and yet-to-come.

That crowd I sensed on Halloween night? They have been with me all week. Maybe they're always with me, even when I forget about them, and especially when I am too compromised to imagine that possibility. I'm not sure what they're saying, but my general sense is that they're echoing the English mystic St. Julian of Norwich. At around age 30, Julian had a series of what we might describe as grotesque visions of Jesus. She spent the rest of her long life writing about them and giving spiritual guidance. In her visions, Jesus revealed to Julian these words, which might be the chorus of every saintly hymn: "... all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well."

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> "USA coronavirus: news summary for 31 October" *Diario AS*, available online at [https://en.as.com/en/2020/10/31/latest\\_news/1604138137\\_072079.html](https://en.as.com/en/2020/10/31/latest_news/1604138137_072079.html) (accessed November 1, 2021). The article states that the data were from the Johns Hopkins University & Medicine Coronavirus Resource Center, which is online at <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>. It reports the following data, cited to Johns Hopkins: 1,195,568 global deaths; 9,126,361 U.S. cases; 230,556 U.S. deaths.

<sup>2</sup> This was the data presented on November 1, 2021, at the Johns Hopkins University & Medicine Coronavirus Resource Center, which is online at <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>. The full report for that day included the following: 5,004,153 global deaths; 45,037,906 U.S. confirmed cases; 746,502 U.S. deaths

<sup>3</sup> Daniel E. Slotnik, "The official global virus death toll has passed five million. The full count is undoubtedly higher." *The New York Times*, November 1, 2021, available online at <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/01/world/5-million-covid-deaths.html> (accessed November 7, 2021).

<sup>4</sup> Mariele Fluegeman, "Triptych for the Odd Saint Out," available online at <https://poets.org/triptych-odd-saint-out> (accessed November 7, 2021).

<sup>5</sup> Lesbia Scott, "I sing a song of the saints of God," *The Hymnal 1982* (New York: Church Publishing, 1985), 293.

<sup>6</sup> "grotesque," Merriam-Webster, available online at <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/grotesque> (accessed November 7, 2021).