



All Saints' Day (B)

Baptized into Eternal Life

[RCL] Wisdom of Solomon 3:1-9 or Isaiah 25:6-9; Psalm 24; Revelation 21:1-6a; John 11:32-44

The Feast of All Saints invites us to look back.

The Church has set this day apart for Christians to remember those who in their earthly labors were particularly shining examples of life in Christ and to celebrate those who in this life named and claimed Jesus, no matter the cost.

Apostles like Simon Peter, Andrew, and Thomas.

Martyrs like Stephen, Justin, Sebastian, and Agnes.

Evangelists like Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

Modern-day prophets like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Pauli Murray.

But we do not look back only to recount the lives the saints lived on earth. We look back to be reminded of the lives they live now in the very place we also long to be: resting in the light of the One we still strive to serve. We look back to remember the hope that beckons us forward: God's promise of eternal life.

Eternal life is the foundation of Christian hope. Because of it, we have nothing to fear this side of the resurrection. Our hope calls us to channel the uncommon faith of the saints, to follow their example of steadfast devotion to Jesus, and when the time comes, to join them in their eternal rest.

This promise is the subject of today's collect. We pray, "Give us grace so to follow your blessed saints in all virtuous and godly living, that we may come to those ineffable joys that you have prepared for those who truly love you."

There is a lot of hope in those words. But it's not merely hope for a distant future. It is a hope that abides in the grace God gives us now.

Those of us with a faith much more common than that of the Church's saints still might doubt our ability to live up to their example. That's reasonable. Looking back on a person's life, labeling them a saint, and

renewing a commitment to live like them is a fairly easy thing to do on a Sunday morning. Following through with it on a Monday afternoon, on the other hand, is a whole lot harder.

Because of that, it's important for us to remember the first sentence of today's collect. "Almighty God, you have knit together your elect in one communion and fellowship in the mystical body of your Son Christ our Lord."

These words acknowledge God's promise of eternal life as a present reality. As living members of the body of Christ on earth, we are united with the saints who have gone before us. Even though we do not yet share their joy at rest, we are one with them on earth and in heaven.

Nowhere is this promise more clearly envisioned than in the covenant of our baptism. When we pass through the waters, we are buried with Christ in his death so that we might be raised with him to new life. By dying to sin and death, we are freed to inhabit eternal life—now.

If we can begin to imagine the font instead of the grave as the gateway to eternal life, then we will begin to experience to the fullest extent the consequences of our salvation. Transformed by God's grace through baptism, we have already been called through death into the risen life of Jesus. We are sent into the world as living members of the living Lord to find our joy in serving others in Jesus' name, to give abundantly without thought of what we might receive in return, to ask ourselves how we can sacrifice for others, and, if we can do it responsibly, to do it.

This is not to say that a baptized life is a charmed life. Baptism by no means perfectly immunizes us against the powers of sin and death. Systems of oppression and personal temptations continue their assaults against us. But when they do, baptism calls us to be different. It calls us to resist the wiles of our culture: lying, cheating, stealing, exploiting, earning more at any cost, and buying more no matter the cost.

It's not that the baptized don't struggle. We do. It's that when we do, we are called to repent, return, and remember that those struggles do not define us. We are defined by something much greater: eternal life—not a carrot meant to entice us forward or a prize awarded for following Jesus "just right"—but the promise of God's grace already fulfilled for us in Christ's death and resurrection.

In many parts of the church, this Sunday also offers us a time to remember all of the faithful departed who have preceded us to glory, especially those members of our parish communities who have died in the past year.

By doing so, we again look back to acknowledge those on whose shoulders we stand. Much the same as it is with remembering the saints of our calendar, we do so not for a mere history lesson, but to remember the grace of our baptism that grounds us in the present and makes it possible for us to live the resurrection life now.

These remembrances are likely more difficult than commemorating the saints of old. The absence of those near and dear to us can impact us in uniquely painful ways. Whenever deep grief abounds in our lives, we may struggle with the same question asked in today's gospel. Couldn't God have kept this from happening? As Mary says, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

In answer to this question, the Feast of All Saints reminds us of what Jesus taught Mary on the day he stood with her outside her brother's tomb. The promise of eternal life is not about what God could have done. It is about what God is doing now.

As Jesus stands with Mary and begins to weep, he embodies at once what he will soon embody for all time: his solidarity with our suffering. While this grief alone may not bring our loved ones back, through the power of his death on the cross, he grants all of us life forever.

One of our most well-known All Saints hymns says it this way, "O blest communion, fellowship divine! We feebly struggle, they in glory shine, yet all are one in thee for all are thine."

It's a wonderfully poetic depiction. Some above, some below. Some at rest, some at work. Yet all are one in Jesus.

If our baptism calls us to inhabit this reality in our daily lives, the Eucharist gives us the grace we need to keep doing so. As we celebrate this holy meal, we recall the sacrifice of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. And when we do, all the saints and souls in this life and in the next gather with us to give thanks. At that moment, time bends to unite us with the entire company of heaven—those on whose shoulders we stand and those who will one day stand on ours.

This blessed communion is no less real today than it is any other day, but it is worth looking back to remember—right now—so that we might recall the promise of the joy yet to come, in this life and the next.

***The Rev. Warren Thomas Swenson** is a priest of the Diocese of West Missouri, currently serving as associate priest of Southeast Tennessee Episcopal Ministry (STEM), a system of five yoked congregations in the Diocese of Tennessee. Warren is a candidate for the Master of Sacred Theology degree at the School of Theology at the University of the South in Sewanee, Tenn. where he also serves as Visiting Instructor of Rhetoric in the College of Arts and Sciences. His research interests include queer theology, homiletics, and American presidential rhetoric. Warren received his Master of Divinity degree from Sewanee in 2018 and still resides there with his husband, Walker. Together they enjoy lingering back-porch conversations, racking up frequent flyer miles, and doting on their niece and nephews from afar.*