

All Saints Weekend 2020
October 31-Nov. 1, 2020
Revelation 7:9-17; Matthew 5:1-12
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

We've gotta remember we're not alone. I was reminded the other day how important it is to remember that. I was talking with a friend going through a tough time. I encouraged her to keep reaching out for support and we prayed together for a sure sense of the Lord's saving presence even and especially in the midst of pandemic isolation. "Thank you. I had almost forgotten that I am never really alone."

It's All Saints: no better time to remember that we are surrounded by "a great cloud of witnesses," the very hosts of heaven, cheering us on from above. A couple years ago Pastor Hank sent me this quote from a book called *Whistling in the Dark* by a favorite religious-but-not-preachy author, Frederick Buechner:

At the altar table, the overweight parson is doing something or other with the bread as his assistant stands by with the wine. In the pews, the congregation sits more or less patiently waiting to get into the act. The church is quiet. Outside, a bird is singing. It's nothing special, only a handful of notes angling out in different directions. Then a pause. Then a trill or two. A chirp...

The parson and his assistant and the usual scattering of senior citizens, parents, teenagers **are not alone** in whatever they think they're doing. Maybe that is what the bird is there to remind them. In its own slapdash way the bird has a part in it too. Not to mention "Angels and Archangels and all the company of heaven" if the prayerbook is to be believed. Maybe we should believe it. Angels and Archangels. Cherubim and seraphim. They are all in the act together. It must look a little like the great [light] display at Versailles when all the fountains are turned on at once and the night is ablaze with fireworks. It must sound a little like the last movement of Beethoven's Choral Symphony or the Atlantic in a gale.

And "all the company of heaven" means everybody we ever loved and lost, including the ones we didn't know we loved until we lost them or didn't love at all. It means people we never heard of. It means everybody who ever did – or at some unimaginable time in the future ever will – come together at something like this table in search of something like what is offered at it.

Whatever other reasons we have for coming to such a place, if we come also to give each other our love and to give God our love, then together with [archangels like] Gabriel and Michael, and the fat parson... and the old lady whose teeth don't fit... we are the communion of saints.

Last week we heard our Lord's words: "...you will know the truth and the truth will make you free." (John 8:32) The truth is: we who are part of the communion of saints we profess belief in when we recite the Apostles Creed, we are a motley crew!

When I was little one of my favorite books was *The Littlest Angel*. The littlest angel was very young and inexperienced, got into a ton of trouble, and always had his halo a bit askew. That's us! Truth be told, we're a holy "rogues gallery." We're not saints because **we're** holy. We're "saints" because **God** is holy, and we belong to God.... When Anna Elizabeth is baptized this Sunday afternoon, I'll say, "You belong to Christ, in whom you have been baptized. Alleluia!" Thanks to COVID, only 8 people will be visibly present, including myself. But if we listen real closely, maybe we'll hear the rustle of wings, for surely the whole company of heaven will be tuning in, helping to usher this child into the Body of Christ.

We trust that the company of heaven includes our loved ones who have died. During the prayers of the church this weekend, we name our brothers and sisters in Christ who have passed from earthly to everlasting life: Holy Trinity members and others at whose funerals or memorial services Pastor Beth, Peter or I presided. Many of us have other dear ones on our hearts as well. My nephew Frankie who died in February is on my personal list. Who's on yours?

Our first lesson from Revelation 7 holds out this promise, this vision of an **end** to all kinds of suffering and the **advent** of joy:

*15" ... they are before the throne of God...
and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them.
16They will hunger no more, and thirst no more;
the sun will not strike them,
nor any scorching heat;
17for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd,
and he will guide them to springs of the water of life,
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."*

Here's an understatement: it's been a difficult season to be ill or dying or grieving. How many people do we know, how many stories have we heard about hospitalized patients marooned without visitors, people dying alone, families unable to gather for funerals, and now families anticipating

Thanksgiving dinner not just without the deceased, but without living family members either? All these factors make for what is called complicated grieving. ‘Hard enough to bury a loved one, but even harder if there was no in-person goodbye or if there’ve been no grieving rituals.

And yet, Jesus says to us, now, in the midst of this pandemic, *“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.”* (Matt. 5:4) Delivering comfort is the job of the Holy Spirit, whose very nickname is Comforter. Wings enfolding, arms embracing, the warmth of a quilt, the soothing motion of being rocked in a parent’s arms: whatever works for you is what God provides! Psalm 34 is assigned this weekend, and verse 7 says:

*The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear the LORD
and delivers them.*

I’m usually not big on martial imagery, but I love the concept of my perimeter being guarded by angels! I’m more than willing to be delivered from my fears and my worries, to be saved from real and imagined dangers by the Lord and His hosts!

As I’ve often noted, the Lord often fulfills holy promises through us. There’s a good chance the Lord has a plan to use us to comfort those who mourn – even if **we** mourn, too. So let’s remember we’re **already** part of the communion of saints, and there’s plenty of kingdom work we’re being called to do in this world, including drying the tears of those whom we love, who are mourning the passing of those they love.... In this and all our work we’re supported by the whole company of heaven. Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham