

Children of God
Rev. Dr. Glenda Hollingshead; November 1, 2026
All Saints Day Worship Service
Psalm 34:1-10, 22; 1 John 3:1-3

Whenever we recite the Apostles' Creed, we affirm our belief in "the communion of saints." And on All Saints Day, we sing of those saints "who are patient and brave and true, who toiled and fought and lived and died for the Lord they loved and knew." Through these words, we remember those who have gone before us in faith, and we give thanks for the ways their lives have shaped our own.

As I reflect on the saints who've gone before us, I cannot help but think of my Aunt Doris and Uncle Clyde, who entered the church triumphant in recent years. They were like parents to me. They introduced me to Jesus and showed me so much kindness and care. For that, and so much more, I will be forever grateful. Through their love, I caught glimpses of hope and grace. Yet, as I grew from a teenager into a young woman, I began to wrestle with some of the teachings I had heard in the little church I attended with them. The God I heard about from the pulpit did not always seem to match the God I was coming to know—a God whose arms were open wide,

whose love made room for everyone, and who looked at every child, from every place and every walk of life, and called them "my child."

It wasn't until I found myself in seminary that I discovered the language to make sense of what I had been experiencing. The deeper I ventured into theological studies, the more I came to understand something important: **It matters where your Bible begins.** Oh, we all know that the Bible opens with Genesis 1:1: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." And what a beginning it is! God brings forth light, separates the waters, covers the earth with plants and trees, sets the sun and moon and stars in the heavens, fills the waters and skies with living creatures, and populates the earth with animals. And then, God turns toward humankind. In verse 27, we read, "So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them." Let that sink in for a moment. We are made in the image of God. Before we've done anything right or wrong, before we've succeeded or failed, before we've earned anyone's approval, we are part of God's good creation, bearing the very image of our Creator. That's a pretty remarkable place to begin, isn't it?

And yet, many of us know this creation story in our minds while carrying a very different story in our hearts. Rather than rooting our identity in Genesis 1, we've come to see ourselves through the lens of Genesis 3—the story of Adam and Eve, the serpent, and the forbidden fruit. You know it well. The serpent tempts them, they eat the fruit, and when God comes walking in the garden, they hide among the trees. What follows is a story of broken trust, consequences, and banishment. The humans who once walked freely with God now find themselves afraid and ashamed, and the life they've known is forever changed.

So why does this matter? Why am I bringing it up at all? Because I have come to believe that the place where our story begins shapes everything that follows. How we understand ourselves shapes how we live, how we treat ourselves, and how we relate to others. Do you see yourself as fallen, broken, sinful, and somehow beyond repair? Do you berate yourself for every mistake, with inner dialogue that seems far more critical than compassionate? Have you ever been left with the impression that you are so burdened by sin that there is little hope for you? Or are you able to begin somewhere else? Can you see yourself as a child of God who, like every one of us, is imperfect and in need of grace?

Without a doubt, sin is real. We make mistakes. We hurt each another. We fall short of the people God calls us to be. But that is not the whole story, and it isn't who we are first and foremost. First and foremost, we're created in the image of God. We are children of God, loved beyond our ability to earn it. We are, dare I say, saints in the making. And thanks be to God, our lives are held within God's larger story of grace, love, and redemption.

Today's Scripture reminds us that we are loved because we are children of God. Truly, we are saints in the making. Of course, some days we don't feel much like saints, do we? We stumble. We fall short. But then, by the grace of God, we get up and keep going. If that sounds familiar, we can take comfort in a definition of saints often attributed to Robert Louis Stevenson: *"The saints are the sinners who keep on going."* I love that! *The saints are the sinners who keep on going.* Saints are ordinary people, like you and me. We aren't saints because we are perfect or because we always get it right. We are saints because we belong to God, and God's grace is at work in us, shaping us into people we could never become on our own. So, in gratitude for God's mercy, we keep on going. We keep seeking the face of God, learning to love more generously, and discovering new ways to extend that love to others. Fueled by God's grace, we keep striving to make a difference in this world that Jesus came to save.

Kathleen Norris, a Presbyterian author and spiritual leader, enjoys going into schools where students have little access to the Arts. She encourages them to see writing as an important way to express themselves. One day, Norris asked a 5th grade class to write a poem using similes. To Norris' surprise, one little boy wrote a strikingly good poem entitled, "My Very First Dad."

I remember him/like God in my heart, I remember him in my heart
like the clouds overhead,
and strawberry ice cream and bananas
when I was a little kid. But the most I remember
is his love
as big as Texas
when I was born.

While Norris was impressed with the poem, the little boy's teacher was stunned. You see, the boy wasn't a good student. But there was more to the story. In talking to the teacher, Norris learned that while the boy was born in Texas, he never even knew his father. The man had skipped town the day he was born. Yet, "I remember him like God in my heart," the little boy wrote. I find myself wondering about those words. How do you remember someone you've never known? Perhaps the boy was reaching for something he could not quite name—a love he longed for, a presence he could feel, a sense of being held by something bigger than himself. Could it be that, even in the absence of the father he never knew, he had experienced a love as big as Texas? A love that gave him a way to imagine what a father might be? The writer of 1st John invites us to consider such an extraordinary love:

> See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God, and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed.

> What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.

Writing to a community struggling with conflicting messages about what it means to follow Christ, the author of 1 John reminds them that the heart of the gospel is love. We are loved by God, and we are children of God, even now. Our deepest identity isn't defined by our family, our culture, our nation, or our failures. We belong to God, and we're called to grow into the fullness of that identity. And that growth is ongoing. We are not finished; we are still becoming—as we nurture our faith through practices that keep us rooted in God's love. We worship, spend time in Scripture, care for those in need, and pray. Oh, how we pray! Not to earn God's love, but to live more fully into the love that is already ours.

Later in his letter, John reveals his reason for writing: "I write this to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life." Believers in Jesus Christ have the promise of being called children of God now, and the promise of an eternal future in God's presence.

All Saints' Day is a joyous occasion to remember the saintly ones who have crossed from this world into the next. What a wonderful inheritance they have left us. As one writer puts it, "through their love and compassion, their instruction and correction, their laughter and tears, their honesty and humility, their sacrifice and dedication, and most of all, their faith, they are still speaking." What a great legacy to claim for ourselves and to share with the world!

And so, as we go through our life, day by day, sharing our faith with others, which origin story will be at the heart of how we live and move in the world? Will we be guided by an origin story that begins with Genesis 1—God created us in God's own image and called us good? Or will we settle for Genesis 3 as our starting point—human failure, sin, and separation from God? Where our Bible begins matters. Yes, both stories are ours. We know we make mistakes. We know we need grace. But we do not have to let our failures define us. Instead, we can embrace the love that God has already given us, that we should be called children of God for that is what we are. Children of God! Saints in the making! Amen.

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