

All Saints (Year B)

Revelation 21:1-6a

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

*'See, the home of God is among mortals.
He will dwell with them;
they will be his peoples,
and God himself will be with them;
he will wipe every tear from their eyes.
Death will be no more;
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for the first things have passed away.'*

And the one who was seated on the throne said, 'See, I am making all things new.' Also he said, 'Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.' Then he said to me, 'It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.'

There's a video that has been making the rounds on the internet nowadays about a pastor getting creative about the way he describes what he does. The video clip goes something like this:

People often say to me, "what do you do?" and it's always very difficult to know what to say because if I say to you that I'm a reverend, which I am, that conjures up certain images in people's minds as to what I might be. So I like to be a little bit creative in telling people what I do.

I sat next to this lady on an airplane and I said, "hello." She said, "well, hello!" I asked her what she did and she told me and then she asked me what I did and I said "Well...."

"I work for a global enterprise." She said, "Do you!?" and I said, "Yes, I do. We've got outlets in nearly every country in the world."

She said, "Have you?!" and I said, "Yes, we do! We've got hospitals, and hospices, and homeless shelters, we do marriage work, we've got orphanages, we've got feeding programs, we've got educational programs, we do all kinds of justice and reconciliation work, basically we look after people from birth to death, and we deal in the area of behavioral alteration."

She went, "WOW!!!! What's it called?"

I said, "it's called the Church. Have you not heard of it!?"

He then goes on to say that if we are a follower of Jesus, then we are members of a truly *global* enterprise. And what's more, he goes on to say that it's really more than a global enterprise but truly an intergalactic enterprise because it involves everyone that's gone before us!

Friends, what a great reminder on this All Saints Day! What a great reminder that you and I are part of something bigger than us! What a *great* reminder that you and I journey with sisters and brothers of the faith is all the corners of the world. How important it is that we celebrate that the wind of the Holy Spirit that is in this very room is a power blown for all parts of the world. We are told that they will come to the Table from the east, the west, the north, and the south to partake of the grace of Jesus' resurrection. May we always remember that we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses!

Now, when the people who are Shelter Island Presbyterian Church say on this All Saints Day that we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, there is a rather tangible particularity to what we are saying. That is, of course, because we are, quite literally, surrounded by the saints at rest in the cemeteries that surround this building.

Now, to be perfectly clear, when we call these deceased friends and loved ones "saints," we are *not* calling them "perfect" or "holier-than-thou." Just as a point of curiosity, please raise your hand if you are either related to or knew someone who is buried outside the walls of this building. Now, raise your hand if you are aware that that person was *not* perfect!

We call them "saints" not because they were perfect but because they struggled like us, they lived like us, doing the best they could to live their lives to the fullest, helping others in the ways they knew how, being part of the global enterprise known as the Church whether they were aware of it or not.

We are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses that is cheering us on as we run this race.

A few weeks ago, I had the privilege of attending the home cross-country meet at Goat Hill. I and my furry companion, Elsie, stood along with other family and friends as we cheered on the Shelter Island competitors, as well - I should say - as the opposing team. We had many of our own excel including Lindsey and Emma Gallagher, Caitlin Binder, Lily Garrison, Will Garrison, and Kal Lewis! Additionally, both the first place for the boys and the girls were members of our congregation. So go Presbyterians!

Looking back on that beautiful afternoon cheering on our youth at Goat Hill, it reminds me of what we are celebrating today. Just like the community that gathered to cheer on the youth as they ran their race, on All Saints Sunday we celebrate the great cloud of witnesses that gather to cheer us on as we run this race.

And what is the race that we are running? Well, it may look difference from congregation to congregation but there is one thread that runs true throughout all of us: we are all proposing an alternative narrative of grace.

What I mean by this is best explained by turning to today's passage from the book of Revelation. Too often, the Book of Revelation is a book that has been misinterpreted so much as to turn it into a source of fear rather than what it should be, which is a source of HOPE. The single most important thing that the book of Revelation preaches is that God *will* have the final word and that final word *will* be GOOD!

Revelation 21 proclaims to us that the day is coming when the first heaven and the first earth will pass away and be renewed as the *new* heaven and the *new* earth. Revelation 21 promises us that the day is coming when every tear will be wiped away. The day is coming, we are told, when death will be no more, when mourning and crying and pain will be no more. We are told these things because God is making all things new! God, our Alpha and our Omega, our beginning and our ending, will give water to all who are thirsty.

Newness is coming, friends! Newness is coming!

And we are invited to be part of this newness. We are commissioned to proclaim it. We are charged to *embody* it. And that isn't always easy. That isn't always convenient. As we are running this race, it can come to us as a pretty nasty, steep hill that threatens to exhaust us and give us cramps and cause our breathing to be become labored and our mouths to run dry.

But we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, cheering us on, holding us in their prayers and sustaining us with their memories of struggle and hope, of witness and courage.

That's what All Saints Day is about! Remembering that we are not alone as we proclaim a narrative that is often counter-cultural.

"Newness? We have nothing but the same old, same old," we are told. "God is making all things new" we say as we run the race.

"Joy? We have nothing to be joyful about. The world has gone to hell in a hand basket," we are told. "God will wipe the tear from every eye" we say as we run the race.

"Abundance? There's not enough to go around," we are told. "God will give water to the thirsty from the spring of the water of life" we say as we run the race.

"Life? The only things guaranteed in life are death and taxes," we are told. "God is the Alpha and Omega, our beginning and end," we say as we run the race.

Friends, we are called to preach an alternative narrative. One that ends not in death but in life eternal. One that speaks in abundance and not scarcity. One that ends in joy and not tears. One that ends in nothing and no one but the God who calls us beloved children.

Sisters and Brothers in Christ, we are called to proclaim newness and, when you think about it, newness is the most precious and desired commodity in the world. In a world craving newness, we as the Church, as a global enterprise, can embody newness in particularly tangible and life-giving ways.

"You need newness? It's on the way. In the meantime, here's some newness in this warm bowl of soup"

"You need newness? It's coming, we promise. In the meantime, here's some newness in this life-saving winter coat."

"You need newness? It's been promised! In the meantime, here's some newness in this compassionate ear."

"You need newness? It's right here at the Table. In the meantime, let's partake of it together."

Friends, happy All Saints Day! Together, with the saints in every time and place, let us together share newness even as we wait for it. May it be so in our worship. May it be so in our lives.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Alleluia! Amen!