All Saints 2024 - The Rev. Molly Scherm

We come this morning with more than one thing on our minds. Today we commemorate All Saints Day, remembering and giving thanks for those ancestors of faith who nurture and inspire us, as well as for loved ones departed this life during the last year. And the Saints do merit our gratitude and our celebration.

We also come with anxious and uneasy hearts, though, as our painfully divided nation prepares for a national election, two days hence, that will determine the near – and perhaps the far – direction of our common life.

Honestly, I've been worried for weeks about what I can say from the pulpit today. I think that vague anxiety has been hanging over everyone I've talked with in the last week. The ugliness of the political ads is ramping up, and the media, much as I appreciate them, seem fixed on emphasizing the negativity coming from both sides of the electoral campaigns, and the pundits are speculating on terrible situations that may result from the outcomes of the election. The language of violence is pervasive, and we can't discount it, because violence has become one of the features of the polarization in our political life. Will we have a clear and clean result days from now, and be able to move forward (for better or for worse)? Or will controversy increase our divisions? What does our faith offer us as we celebrate an ancient church tradition in uncertain times? Let's see if we can't find some glimmers of hope.

One thing that always comes up this week is how the Church's "Feast of All Saints" does or does not relate to people dressing in costumes and children approaching neighborhood homes in hope of receiving candy (or as seems to be the current fashion, attending "Trunk or Treat" events).

In the New Testament, both Paul and Luke refer to all Christian believers as Saints: when teaching about spiritual gifts, for example, Paul says that God grants them "to equip the saints for ministry". (Eph 4:11-13) In Acts, Luke repeatedly refers to congregations of Jesus' followers as saints: Peter, for example, "came down to visit the saints living in Lydda". (Acts 9:32)

Did you know that the setting aside of a date to recognize the faithful departed took place as early as the third century? As the early church took shape and firmed up its belief system, it came to speak about the "Communion of Saints" to which all believers belong, including that language in the Creed that was agreed to at the Council of Nicaea in 325, which we continue to proclaim today. When we speak of the Communion of Saints, we frequently go on to talk about "a great cloud of witnesses" who surround and accompany us on the journey of faith.

So the first way the Church understands saints is simply as all believers – those who strive, in whatever ways and to whatever degree we can, to follow Jesus.

Some of those saints become Saints (with a capital "S) because they lead lives of faith that we recognize as extraordinary. Some were martyrs, but others were scholars, monastics, musicians, clergy, evangelists, revolutionaries and more – they are individuals in whom we believe God was working, whose lives and choices point us to the Christ we glimpse in them.

If you look at the Prayer Book's List of Holy Days (pp. 17-18) you'll find the list of recognized Saints who are in fact assigned Holy Days on which we commemorate their lives. There are actually not many - only seven individuals are named, because the list reflects the perceptions of the church from centuries past. The church today maintains a much broader list of persons who may be recognized as Saints in the church, and who have days designated for their commemoration, though we don't consider these to be "Holy Days".

I find it cool that this list of "Holy Women [and] Holy Men" is not fixed, but is ever expanding. At every convention of the national church there are nominations of individuals to be added to the list of those recognized for the way their faith has shaped their lives and enabled them to make a difference in their world.

Different church communities in the Episcopal Church practice different traditions in the ways they relate to the Saints. Some individuals offer prayers asking the saints to pray with or assist them, while others use the example of the saints' lives to inspire themselves.

Among the practices common to many Episcopal churches regarding saints is one that we are practicing today. In our prayers on All Saints Day we remember the names of members of this congregation who have died in the past year.

Many cultures of the world, in fact, recognize this time of year as a time for communication with the dead.

Our Mexican siblings celebrate the Day of the Dead, *Dia de los Muertos,* also on November 1. On this holiday, families remember and pay respects to departed family members and friends by gathering around altars of remembrance, to eat and tell stories. My son and his wife, who was born in Mexico, keep a small altar of remembrance, an *ofrenda* in their home year-round.

The pre-christian Celts and Druids of the British Isles celebrated the festival of Samhain mid-way between the fall equinox and the winter solstice, or on October 31 and November 1. They believed that "the barriers between the physical world and the spirit world break down on these days," allowing interaction with those who reside in that otherworld. (History.com: Samhain)

Those emerging from the dead over Samhain included both the ancestors for whom cakes might be laid out in homes, as well as fairies. The practice of dressing in animal or monster

costumes during the festival had the purpose of preventing the fairies from kidnapping the ancestors. (Ibid)

As Christianity took hold in Europe and various pagan practices were adapted and transformed to fit compatibly with Christian faith, the traditions of Samhain became, between the 5th and 9th centuries, the Feast of All Saints, preceded on October 31, by All Hallows Eve.

So all of that is a fun history lesson, but what does any of it mean for us today, trying to see how to be faithful in a complicated and challenging world?

For one thing, the church's All Saints traditions are a reassurance that we are not alone in our struggles. The faithful who have gone before were, just as we are, imperfect folks doing their best, often enough in their own hard times. As one of my favorite All Saints hymns says, "they toiled and fought and lived and died". Their efforts and their perseverance are what makes them saints, and for some of them, God working in and through them made a profound difference in the world.

And they are with us as companions on the journey in the mystical body of Christ – the great cloud of witnesses, the family of God. They are our companions even though we do not see them. But it can be a balm to remind ourselves that they surround us, that they survived the same sort of difficulties that trouble us today, and they went before us in the work of serving the gospel and bringing healing to the world.

It also seems to me that the saint-and-ancestor feasts and festivals throughout time and across space all speak to the fundamental human concern about death – including both our own deaths, and the deaths of those we have loved who are no longer with us. The death that concerns us is not only the physical end of life, but also the subtler, psychological, emotional and spiritual forms of death that show up in all of our lives.

The Feast of All Saints is a good time to recall that scripture promises us that the power of God's love conquers death. Recalling the story of Jesus' raising of his friend Lazarus from the dead, Lutheran pastor and theologian Brian Peterson observes that "Jesus is the one in whom there is life (1:4),... the one who even now calls us out of all the dark and binding places of death. ... the life of Jesus breaks into our present and transforms it... [and] on both sides of the grave there is life for us because Jesus has been sent to call our names." (2018 commentary on John 11:32-44 at Working Preacher.com)

Not only are we not alone because we are a part of the Communion of Saints, but even in the presence of the ugliness that surrounds us, we are called by name and welcomed into the larger life that is God's love for us.

For this love, for the saints and most especially for the life of Jesus, showing us the way and calling us to follow, thanks be to God.