

Until the Resurrection

I Thessalonians 4:13-18

Introduction – The Impulse of All Saint’s Day

Today, we are celebrating All Saint’s Day! This is our third year of observing this special day. We are encouraged when we read through the *Faith Hall of Fame* as we did this morning. And as we consider their example we are inspired to press on:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

Hebrews 12:1-2

I love that passage. It is central to the idea of the communion of saints and the celebration that we observe today. Those who have gone before us are, in a sense cheering us in the field of life from heaven’s bleachers. But we still have questions. What has really happened to my loved one? Where are they now? What does Scripture teach about what will happen in the future? All Saint’s Sunday is a good day to explore those questions.

The Text – I Thessalonians 4:13-18

(Set context)

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. Therefore encourage one another with these words.

Where are the saints now?

One of my favorite verses to quote at a funeral is Ecclesiastes 7:1 that says the day of your death is better than the day of your birth. It's a provocative statement, of course. But what the writer means is that we are all destined for the grave and that fact should make us sober about how we live our lives. Death is sobering. For all other world religions besides Christianity, a person's eternal destiny is based on the goodness of their character and their works. If that were true, we would all be doomed. The Scriptures emphatically say that there is "none that is righteous, no, not one" (Romans 3:10). For the Christian, our righteousness and eternal life is found in Jesus Christ alone.

Someone once said that the measure of any religion is their funerals. So true. The funerals of all other world religions are dark, depressing, and shake the grief-stricken to their core. Their only hope is in their own righteousness, which is no hope at all. But the Apostle Paul says that the Christian grieves with hope. A Christian funeral gives space for both grief and hope. And the Christian's hope is not wishful thinking but rather a solid anchor for the soul in troubled times.

When the Christian dies, his soul departs his body and ascends to heaven where Christ now is. The body is an empty shell. It will either rot in the ground or, in many cases today, be cremated into ashes. It does not matter. The essence of the person – the soul – is no longer there. It is with Christ.

We know that the soul – temporarily without a body – is in heaven with the Lord because the Scriptures teach it in many places. Paul looked forward to death because "to be absent from the body was to be present with the Lord" (II Cor. 5:8). Jesus told the thief on the cross that on that day he would be with him in Paradise (Luke 23:43). In a wonderful teaching moment, Jesus said that the Patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were living in God's presence because Yahweh was a God of the living, not the dead (Luke 20:38). Ultimately, we have the wonderful passage in Hebrews 12 which we read stating that those who have gone before us in the faith are cheering us on from heaven's bleachers.

I like the way one writer put it when speaking about believers in heaven:

Heaven is not so much a reward for our goodness, a kind of celestial Disneyland, as simply the place where Christ reigns in glory. Christians ascend to heaven at death not as their reward, but because Christ wants us to be with Him and heaven is where He is. Heaven is thus not about bliss or sitting on clouds or playing harps or even reunion with loved ones. It is about Jesus.¹

But still, our mind wonders: if they're with Christ, where exactly is that? We struggle with the question because we sometimes have faulty ideas of heaven. We tend to think in spatial or geographical terms. You know...heaven is "somewhere in outer space" as an old children's song once put it. Heaven is so much better understood as another dimension, much like Narnia was another world distinct but connected to earth in C.S. Lewis' famous books. Someday, when I have more time, I look forward to developing that idea more with you. But heaven as another dimension, distinct, but connected to this world makes a lot of sense when we try to understand some of the spiritual mysteries we encounter in this life. The stories of those who were close to death seeing a light – or the wonderful story, recently made into a movie, "Heaven is For Real" fit well into the idea of heaven as another dimension, distinct, but connected to earth. Those moments when God's presence is almost tangible is when the veil between heaven and earth is very thin. Many of us have experienced those things.

The surety of the resurrection

Our text today, written by the Apostle Paul is referring to the dramatic change that will happen to all of those who put their faith in Christ when he returns with the sound of the trumpet blast. I Corinthians 15 is an even more detailed explanation of the event. Simply put, we will all receive a resurrection body "in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye" when Christ returns. Those who have died and whose souls are now present with the Lord will be reunited with a glorified body – much like the body that Christ now has. As Paul says, they will rise first. For those who are in the faith and alive when Christ returns, their bodies, too will be changed into glorified bodies and be taken up to "meet the Lord in the air."

¹ Fr. Lawrence Farley <http://myocn.net/n-t-wright-heaven-and-hell-in-the-scriptures/> (Accessed 11/1/2014)

There were some people in Thessalonica who had forgotten this truth that Paul had taught them. They were influenced by the pessimistic and hopeless philosophies of the Greeks who believed that physical death was the end of existence. Paul had reminded them of their hope found in the resurrection when Christ returns in order to encourage them.

Prayer of Remembrance

All Saints Day should be a day of encouragement. While we grieve the loss of our loved ones, we grieve with hope. We know they are more alive now than ever in Christ's presence in heaven. And we know that we will one day be reunited with them on the day that we see Christ face to face. And so, on this All Saint's Day, we remember in faith and we give thanks for those who have gone before us to be in Christ's presence.

(Prayer)

God of grace,

we thank you for the saints whom we ourselves have known and loved.

It does not come easily to us to call them saints;

it seems as if ordinary mortals are not good enough or great enough,

but you have given your people this name

and invited us into your company,

and you know how much we have loved them.

So for these good companions,

whom we name before you for their love

and for our love of them, we give you grateful thanks...

[Names, spoken out loud...]

In the mystery of your love, in the power of your Spirit,

we are one with them. We give great thanks. Amen

Reunited in Heaven

The Church has often, and to this day, disagreed about how the mystery of Christ's return would unfold. But in the end, all Christian doctrines about the end times, culminate in God's people

being with him in a new heaven and a new earth. In Paul's words from our text, "and so shall we always be with the Lord." From the Book of Revelation, hear this beautiful description of the heavenly city:

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, 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, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."

Revelation 21:1-4

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.

Revelation 22:1-5

All Saint's Remembrance Film – "Shall We Gather At the River"