

"Living As If..."

Isaiah 25:6-9; Ps. 24; Revelation 21:1-6
Chapel Lane Presbyterian Church
Rev. David E. Young
All Saints Sunday, November 1, 2009

Today we celebrate All Saints Day. It is an important day in the life of the church, too significant a day to leave somewhere among the leftover Halloween candy, overshadowed by the night of fun and festivity that would be meaningless apart from it. We cannot have All Hallow's Eve (Halloween) without All Hallow's (All Saints) Day.

Truth be told, every Sunday is a celebration of All Saints Day. It is the time when we come into the presence of the dead. We hear once again the voices of Isaiah and the Psalmist and John in the Book of Revelation, speaking to us of their experience with the Holy One of Israel, the God who was and is and is to come.

In Scripture we see God take the prophet Ezekiel to a valley filled with dry bones and ask: "Can these bones live?" We hear God saying in Revelation: "Behold, I make all things new!" (Rev. 21:5) We hear Paul asking in the book of Romans: "But how are people to believe in a God they've never heard of? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? ... Faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ." (Romans 10:14-17)

The fact is, none of us would be here apart from the witness of the saints: Either the saints that are still with us or the saints who have gone before. Parents or grandparents, a family member or a neighbor or a friend, someone pointed us toward Christ. Did any of us wake up one day and out of the blue speak the name of Jesus and surrender our lives to him without first having some encounter with his claim to be the Son of God, the Resurrection and the Life, the Vine of which we are the Branches?

We would not have the richness of the Scriptures were it not for men and women of faith who needed to tell the story of their "God encounter". And so today we receive their witness, their testimony.

But the marvelous thing is that their ancient words still have power to move hearts and transform lives. We hear the testimony of dead people each time we pick up and open the Good Book. It is a book composed by the dead. It is a book of memory. But the amazing thing is that as we read, the Holy Spirit pulls up along side us and these dead ones walk out of their tombs again and have life and point the way for us to travel.

And we are grateful - grateful that their faithful witness to our faithful God has not been lost, grateful that they still have the power to testify to us, grateful that the words they speak are a present word, encouraging us to live as if these words are not only true, but are God's word to us.

We are a community that moves forward by looking backward. We celebrate a common life in Christ today because of the words of yesterday and the power of the Holy Spirit that points us toward tomorrow.

Why do we have a hard time believing that the God of the resurrection is a present reality? Like Martha and Mary in the story of the raising of Lazarus, we may profess Jesus to be the Resurrection here and now, but like them we are unable to translate that into a present powerful reality.

Like them we may believe that Lazarus and our loved ones and we ourselves will rise at the last day. That is a word of future hope. Like other Christians we may believe that Jesus died on the cross and was

raised by the power of God. That is a historical and spiritual fact. But, like them, we too may have a hard time translating it into a present word of hope for here and now. We too look at the tomb and say to Jesus, "You don't really want to roll that stone away, do you? There will be such a stench!"

But in the face of our future faith and our past perspective and our present reality, God speaks to us here and now, inviting us to live as if the God of the ages is our God too and is still a present help in our troubled times.

God's word can speak its way into our hurts, our hopelessness and our hatreds! God's word of new life can stare down the words of failure and fault that we find with ourselves and with others on an almost daily basis!

The witness of the saints has to stand for something! The lives of the saints who have gone before us can encourage us to believe that there is something more to being here than just remembering the past or just getting a glimpse of a hoped-for, but totally unrealistic, future.

God has power to transform us in this present moment and to give us strength and endurance and the conviction that we "can do all things through Christ, who strengthens us". (Phil. 4:13)

And so we gather alongside of other saints to hear God's word and to share in this holy meal with the gathering of God's faithful saints in heaven and God's fearful saints on earth, and we try to silence the voice in us that wants to say, "Yes, I believe, but can God really do anything to alter the situation I am in?"

We gather as people of faith who are here because the Truth is stronger than the facts on the ground, stronger than the weight of the

stone rolled against the tomb, stronger than our limited expectations or diminished imagination: Jesus has already come and has already done what needs to be done and has already given us new life.

And so we too can experience of the power of the resurrection here and now. We too can live into the rich heritage that is ours because of the Holy Spirit that is given to us.

When Jesus stands before the church of today it is as though he is standing before a tomb. The call to the church to come alive is a command that will not be denied. Jesus calls us to lay aside our grave clothes and be unbound and live in the light of the new day and believe that he is the God of the living and not of the dead, and to know that this is his word for us this day.

On this All Saints Sunday we give thanks for all the saints who are living the unbound life of resurrection glory and we pray for the courage and the confidence to listen to Jesus' call and to live not just "as if" the story of our faith is truth, but to live fully precisely because it is true.

And may we find that in living life from this perspective we are set free: free to believe that God just might have something to say to us today as we give thanks for the faithful saints of yesterday and claim our place as part of the vast multitude of saints today who look forward to tomorrow in hope, trusting that the God who was and who will be is the God who is Our Lord and Our God.

May it be so for us. Amen.