

Daniel 7:1-3, 15-18
Ephesians 1:11-23
Luke 6:20-31

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All Saints Sunday
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“Yesterday, all my troubles seemed so far away. Now it looks as though they’re here to stay. Oh, I believe in yesterday.” Most of you have heard these nostalgic lyrics by John Lennon, and can relate to the sentiment. Perhaps you’re more like Annie in the musical: “The sun’ll come out tomorrow; bet your bottom dollar that tomorrow there’ll be sun! Just thinkin’ about tomorrow clears away the cobwebs and the sorrow, ‘til there’s none!” My father liked John Denver’s: “Today while the blossom still clings to the vine, I’ll taste your strawberries; I’ll drink your sweet wine. A million tomorrows shall all pass away ‘ere I forget all the joy that is mine today.”

Personally, I remember a VBS song from “Amazing Journey” in 1993, my first summer with All Saints: “Yesterday, today and tomorrow; everything around us seems to change. But when we turn back the pages and look through the ages, we see the love of God has always been the same.” It gets me thinking about the impact of time as we conceptually juggle yesterday’s memories and legacies, today’s opportunities and limitations, as well as tomorrow’s hopes and fears. Do our visions of future seem like a promising dream or a nightmare? Does the past make us laugh or cry? Likely both. Are we able to gratefully embrace today as God’s gift? Or do present circumstances fill us with misgivings instead of thanksgivings? In 1859, author Charles Dickens began his novel “A Tale of Two Cities”: “It was the best of times; it was the worth of times.” How does this contradiction seem to fit any given year?

All Saints Sunday juggles past, present and future. “Tomorrow” is the stuff of Biblical prophecy in dismal times when prospects looked bleak. History usually points out human failings of slow learners, critiquing whatever crisis people faced as God’s punishment. Yet, there was enough grace and forgiveness to keep hope and faith alive. Our present suffering is not the end of the story in God’s eyes. If only we could see what Heaven sees, and believe something good may come out of our unhappy circumstances.

Daniel, in our First Lesson, has troubling dreams. He doesn’t know how to interpret the winds of change, or the nature of the beasts haunting him. An interpreter acknowledges the reality of these powers in earthly terms, but reassures the prophet how God’s Kingdom will still prevail. While darkness is real, so is the Light of Heaven.

In the book of Ephesians, Paul makes the same claim, praying for his friends in the congregation how God will give them a spirit of wisdom and revelation, enlightening the eyes of their hearts to live with hope. This power is found in Christ for all who believe.

When we turn to our Gospel lesson from Luke 6, Jesus surprises the disciples by reinterpreting how the world sees things from Heaven’s perspective. We know from experience how it is stressful to not have enough money to pay bills, let alone to not afford a few luxuries.

How could Jesus say the poor are most blessed? It’s counter-intuitive. Most commercials hype how having more is better, how prestige and happiness come with expensive purchases. On the other hand, more stuff takes more maintenance, generating more work and worry, perhaps more debt and competitive friction with others. Could simplifying our lives and lowering our consumption actually prove to be a blessing?

What does Jesus mean when He said the hungry are blessed, inferring they will be filled? Is it our full bellies which make us content? Should everyday be like Thanksgiving afternoon? I remember reading a parable about a king whose rich lifestyle and cuisine left him dissatisfied and unhappy. Nothing tasted good to him anymore. His oldest advisor reassured the King he knew of someone who made a very tasty meal, but it would require a journey. It was the advisor's elderly brother who lived in a cottage deep in the woods. The King agreed to journey with his advisor, but the distance took several days and they ran out of provisions. By the time they reached their destination, the King was starving. An elderly man was stirring stew over a campfire outside his modest home, offering them both a meal. The King and his advisor were grateful, both saying it was the best-tasting food they had ever eaten! Hunger can awaken our senses with renewed appreciation in times of need.

The Beatitudes challenge us with a different way to see things, enlightening us in the midst of dark times with the right attitudes to be at ... Beatitudes. To do unto others as you would have them do to you is not only a means of staying spiritually healthy ourselves, but it can appropriately bring shame to those who need to change. If we act in vengeance toward those who've wronged us, they'll likely justify their actions. You're no saint if you play by their rules.

We don't like to feel spiritually dried up, to become apathetic in faith, to question God's existence or ask if we really matter to Him. The strange thing about facing a crisis in life is how it often causes us to ask the questions which really matter: the purpose to life, reasons for suffering, fears about death, and the hope of heaven. I've been told by military veterans there aren't many atheists when soldiers cower in their foxholes during battle. When we can't pretend to be in control, when threatened with the loss of something precious, then we are motivated to seek comfort and hope. Our eyes are opened to blessings we've taken for granted.

Helen Keller wrote these words in a letter: "I have often thought that it would be a blessing if each human being were stricken blind and deaf for a few days at some time during adult life. Darkness would make them more appreciative of sight; silence would teach them the joys of sound." When we face losses in life, wrestling with fear and despair, then we will comprehend hope, appreciating how we've been blessed in life. It may take an empty chair where a loved one once sat, an empty pay envelope needed to pay our debts, or an emptiness within. Then we start asking the questions about what really matters.

Each of us makes a difference in the lives of others by the small ways we witness, as some have done for us. When people struggle in despair, asking questions you don't know how to answer, open your heart to those times you've struggled and let them know you care. Ask Christ to guide you. Your willingness to suffer with them is more memorable than any attempts to give answers. Perhaps struggling to write words which express your heart and soul is the confession you need to give. It opens closed doors, opening blind eyes and deaf ears. It changes attitudes. A saint is simply someone who chooses to live and die in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, striving to demonstrate how to be part of His kingdom yesterday, today, and tomorrow. We celebrate how imperfect people are perfectly loved, granting us a glimpse of Heaven on earth ... in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Amen.