

In the Hand of God
Wisdom of Solomon 3:1-9
Revelation 21:1-6a

“But the souls of the righteous are in the hands of God, and no torment will ever touch them.”

For the benefit of the life-long Presbyterians in the crowd this morning, raised as I was to believe that Presbyterians did not observe All Saints’ Day, I begin by offering a bit of history.

All Saints’ Day can be traced to the very beginning of the church’s life. During the first three centuries after Christ’s death and resurrection, when the Roman Empire was awash in the blood of Christian martyrs, the church began to remember those who had died in the faith by designating the day of their death as a holy day. Given Rome’s unrelenting persecution of Christians, eventually almost every day became a saint’s day. A good idea gone viral, I guess you could say.

So in 607 A.D., Boniface III designated the Sunday after Pentecost, in the Eastern Church, as the Sunday when the deaths of all the saints were to be remembered. A century later, the Western Church chose November 1 for the same purpose. A few hundred years after that, in the 10th century, November 2 became “All Souls’ Day,” when the church honored and prayed for all Christians who had died. Here, I think, is where the plot thickened theologically!

By the 12th century, praying for the dead began to involve paying for the dead in order that they might be purged of their earthly sin and purified in preparation for their heavenly home. Purgatory was given definition by Pope Innocent IV in the 13th century and, soon after that, the Second Council of Lyons institutionalized the dogma as well as the practice of indulgences. Then in 1300, Pope Boniface declared a jubilee of plenary indulgences, Dante wrote his *Divine Comedy*, and the stage was set for the Reformation. Luther called the church out for her corrupt use of indulgences; Calvin railed against the intercession of the saints and praying for the dead, believing such practices presumed Christ’s intercession to be insufficient, and that is why I grew up believing Presbyterians did not celebrate All Saints’ Day.

Now, of course, our latest Book of Common Worship in the Presbyterian Church offers an entire liturgy for the day, including the promise of the gospel spoken by Austin at the baptismal font. But our embrace of the yearly observation has left something important about our relationship to the dead unexamined. That something has to do with the error our own tradition not only missed but intensified when we quit both the veneration of saints and the practice of praying for the dead in favor of the doctrine of predestination. The doctrine means to assure us that our final destination is in God’s hand and not the result of our own good works; instead it invites us to obsess about who is saved, who is damned and how we can live in order so as to be in that first number. It turns out that both Roman and Reformed thinking about the dead has focused Christian hope on the eternal disposition of our individual souls rather than fueling our imagination for the holy city, the heavenly banquet, the gathering of all nations, the communion of saints.

God knows there is plenty of warrant in Scripture for the church’s focus on what happens to us as individuals when we die. The reading for today from the Apocrypha is a case in point. The Wisdom of Solomon was written in Greek by a first century B.C. Hellenistic Jew in Alexandria, Egypt who was surely raised to think of the afterlife in terms of his name living on in his children or his good reputation. If he thought about life after death beyond human history at all, as a reader of Hebrew Scripture, he must have thought about the resurrection of the dead in terms of the unity of body and soul.

But now Greek thinking had begun to leave its mark on his mind as it has on ours. He speaks of the immortality of the soul, a decidedly un-Hebraic and un-Christian notion. Writing after Job, he believed with that writer, and with the Greeks, that human suffering no longer was a sign of God's judgment, but was rather the means used by God to make a soul worthy of being in God's presence. Hence the righteous in the hand of God are tested, disciplined, purified like gold in the furnace, in order to be acceptable to God. The lectionary carefully ends the reading on a positive note, with the elect understanding truth, abiding in God's love and being surrounded by God's grace and mercy. I asked Brian to read the next few verses, lest we miss that the ungodly will be punished eternally, their hope in vain, their labors unprofitable and their works useless. This is a ready-made text to underwrite a belief in predestination as well as purgatory. But it is also a text that focuses our minds on our individual souls.

Whether the Roman church hears in these verses a warrant for purgatory or Calvinists are given warrant for double-predestination, both doctrines turn us in on ourselves, *incurvatus in se*, a phrase used by the Reformers and by Luther in particular when he wrote that "Our nature...[is] so deeply curved in on itself that it not only bends the best gifts of God toward itself,...but it also fails to realize that it so wickedly, curvedly and viciously seeks all things, even God, for its own end." Not to be too cynical, but both doctrines keep the church in business, allowing the Roman church to keep its place as the broker of salvation and encouraging Protestants to be fearfully and eternally obsessed with themselves. Neither turns us toward the hope for which we were made.

That hope has everything to do with the communion of saints and the cloud of witnesses who surround us even now. Properly understood, the saints do not intercede on our behalf with God; rather their witness eggs us on to do something brave, to live as though death had no dominion! So it was that the elder John, in exile on a little island named Patmos, wrote to the seven churches in Asia Minor whose members were being fed to the lions. He tells the about-to-be-martyred that the agony and torture inflicted upon God's children by Caesar finally will be no more—neither tears nor mourning nor sorrow nor pain. To keep them keeping on, he fuels their imagination for the holy city; the heavenly banquet; the gathering of all nations in the love God is. But notice this: everything is plural. As New Testament scholar N. T. Wright puts it, this is not a picture of "ransomed souls making their way to a disembodied heaven but rather the New Jerusalem coming down from heaven to earth, uniting the two in a lasting embrace." This is no "piety that sees death as the moment of 'going home at last,' [or] the time when we are 'called to God's eternal peace,'" Wright says, but a word to those whose quarrel, until God's kingdom comes, is with "power-mongers [be they state or church] who want to carve up the world to suit their own ends." This is the faith of the community that is surrounded by the living presence of men and women and children who died doing battle daily with the powers and principalities, because their hope was in him who said, "Behold, I am making all things new."

The baptismal font, it seems to me, is where we begin properly to keep All Saints' Day, remembering with the saints our second birth into the community death cannot touch. From one perspective, baptism is a dangerous thing to do to our children and a fearfully considered step to take as an adult—not as regards the disposition of our souls eternally but because we are being born anew into the church militant. As Austin reminded us today at the font, we are baptized in Christ's death, buried so that, as Christ was raised from the dead, we along with our children are raised to live as citizens of a new heaven and earth where God and not Caesar reigns.

But our keeping of All Saints' Day culminates at the table. There, as Robert Jenson gushes, "I am able to sustain the notion that all God's various holy ones are gathered with us, that in fact we are praising God, as the liturgy of the church has it, 'with angels and archangels and all the

company of heaven,' that if only we could see what is actually there, we would see the mighty thrones and dominions and Mary and Paul and Olaf and my father-in-law and so forth," around the table as the church makes the gospel visible.

Or do we? According to Jens, "the church so cripples its saying of the gospel by the way it does the Eucharist. We take every chance to represent not Jesus and his fellowship," Jens says, "but our own religious concerns. Instead of making a cheerful family party, we organize processions of religiousi, each coming [singularly] for [a] private dose of holiness. Holier or more hygienic than God, instead of sharing a cup, we ...take each [our] little shot-glass. Instead of bread [he says of his own tradition], we eat a sort of paper, symbolic bread as it were...." Likewise, in his book entitled *What Happens at Holy Communion?*, Reformed theologian and friend Michael Welker describes his experience of the supper at my former congregation as "a sad colloquy" and a "private mass." "Like airplane passengers being served by a flight attendant," he said, "they were offered crumbs of bread and tiny plastic cups of [juice]. The very thing that...was supposed to be a 'high point' in the life of the church appeared to me here as a sad 'low point' in the life of an otherwise flourishing and most lively congregation." I bristled when I first read those words, and yet I took the report of his experience to heart. What I failed to take to heart, save with the session, was Michael's counsel that a community must think long and hard and together as it considers how the celebration of the Supper says the gospel to those from north and south, from east and west, who have been invited. Two questions: How might our service of the supper fuel this congregation's imagination for the holy city; the heavenly banquet; the gathering of all nations; the joyful feast of the people of God? In what ways does our service presume we have come for our own private doses of holiness, whether we sit to be served or stand self-consciously in line?

If I could change the architecture of this sanctuary for the sake of saying the gospel, I would remove the pews in favor of chapel chairs, put a big family table in the middle of the nave, and invite us on communion Sundays to form a circle around the table, some standing, some seated. There would be one big loaf broken into four pieces and carried by the elders to the four corners of the circle. "The bread of heaven," the elder would say to the first and the first would say to the next until all had bread. Then from a common pitcher, four cups would be filled and the elders would say, person by person, eye to eye, with great gladness, "The cup of salvation," as we dipped the bread in the cup. And if we could see what was actually there as the organ sounded and the choir sang, we would see the mighty thrones and dominions and Mary and Paul and Katherine and Perry and Chuck and Ann and Shirley and Harry and Carl and Jean and Clarence and Carry and Bob and Fern and Vince and Jeff and Mari and Jean and Harris. Then it would truly be All Saints' Day in the Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill! Thanks be to God.