

“A Holy Flirtation with the World”  
Isaiah 25:1, 4a, 6-10a  
All Saints’ Sunday  
November 5, 2023  
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Isaiah 25:1, 4a, 6-10a, from a Woman’s Lectionary for the Whole Church: Year A

HOLY ONE OF OLD, you are my God;  
I will exalt you, I will praise your name,  
For you have worked wonders,  
Ancient counsel, faithful and trustworthy.  
For you are a refuge to the poor,  
A refuge to the needy in their distress,  
A shelter from the storm and a shade from the heat.  
THE COMMANDER of heaven’s legions will make for all peoples on this mountain  
A feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines,  
Of rich food prepared with marrow, of refined well-aged wines.  
And God will destroy on this mountain  
The shroud that shrouds all peoples,  
The veil that veils all nations.  
God will swallow up death forever.  
Then the SOVEREIGN GOD will wipe away tears from every face,  
And will sweep aside the shame of God’s people from the whole earth,  
For GOD WHOSE NAME IS HOLY has spoken.  
It will be said on that day,  
Look! This is our God; in whom we hope, and who saved us.  
This is the CREATOR OF ALL in whom we hope;  
Let us be glad and rejoice in God’s salvation.  
For the hand of the ANCIENT OF DAYS shall rest on this mountain.  
“God will swallow up death forever.  
Then the SOVEREIGN GOD will wipe away tears from every face,  
And will sweep aside the shame of God’s people from the whole earth,  
For GOD WHOSE NAME IS HOLY has spoken.”

Oh how I wish death could be banished forever, and all the tears washed away. Oh how I wish those who dwell in shame would be lifted up and embraced. Oh how I wish the name of the Holy One would be uttered and all who heard it would fall silent, dropping their weapons, ceasing to rage, falling to their knees, letting the tears cascade down their cheeks at the precious thought of death being no more.

Certainly we are living in times of such pain and anguish and heartbreak that the idea of death being swallowed up forever and ever is an attractive one. The ever-present news cycle brings us images of war, violence, and the dead. And our lives keep on ticking along, bringing to us stories of loved ones' illnesses and suffering, calling us to the bedside of the dying, enfolding us in the shadowy reality of our finite lives. Being present in our own lives, and present with the life of our world, can be exhausting...and many are experiencing it as exhausting right now.

And so on this All Saints' Day, we name those whose presence we call upon for comfort, for reassurance, for encouragement, those whose lives and legacies challenge us to persevere in the pursuit of justice for the oppressed. On this day of recognizing the communion of saints, the cloud of witnesses surrounding us always, we name those who are no longer sharing our pews or sitting in the choir loft or speaking from this pulpit...they have seen their own times of despair and desolation, of heartbreak and horrors; they, too, have surely wished that the words of the prophet would be starkly true: that God will swallow up death forever.

All Saints' Day is one of the most meaningful feasts of the church to me—this time of year itself is so precious, because the veil between this world and whatever lies beyond is so very thin. I imagine it sometimes as opaque spider's silk, stretching between me and those dear ones who have joined the communion of saints.

Prolific spiritual writer Frederick Buechner defined saints this way: "In [Their] holy flirtation with the world, God occasionally drops a pocket handkerchief. These handkerchiefs are called saints."

He goes on to say:

"Many people think of saints as plaster saints, men and women of such paralyzing virtue that they never thought a nasty thought or did an evil deed their whole lives long. As far as I know, real saints never even come close to characterizing themselves that way... In other words, the feet of saints are as much of clay as everybody else's, and their sainthood consists less of what they have done than of what God has for some reason chosen to do through them. When you consider that Saint Mary Magdalene was possessed by seven devils, that Saint Augustine prayed, "'Give me chastity and continence, but not now,'" that Saint Francis started out as a high-living young dude in downtown Assisi, and that Saint Simeon Stylites spent years on top of a sixty-foot pillar, you figure that maybe there's nobody God can't use as a means of grace, including even ourselves."<sup>1</sup>

Sometimes, I can almost hear my grandpa Hugh singing hymns on the back porch, see my grandpa Bob's clever grin, or feel my grandma Betty's warm, rough hand holding mine. And on All Saints' Day, instead of pretending that we are not carrying with us the knowledge of the exact way he said our name or the specific smell of her perfume or the dirt under their fingernails after weeding the garden—on All Saints' Day *we pause*. We put down that knapsack of intimate

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.frederickbuechner.com/weeklysermonillustrations/2016/11/1/all-saints-day#:~:text=In%20his%20holy%20flirtation%20with,deed%20their%20whole%20lives%20long>

knowledge of loved ones, we open the box of things we are afraid of or have forgotten to feel, we acknowledge the proximity of those shadows we barely see on the other side of the veil, and we gather.

We call their names.

We tell their stories.

We look at their pictures.

We wear the sweater they made for us.

We dance to their favorite song.

We remember how they had lives all their own. How they giggled and cried, loved and lost. How they were too early for their time, making peace and doing justice with leaps and bounds that others weren't ready for. We remember how they deserved better, how they didn't receive the love they needed, how they had to break their own hearts sometimes. How they were real people who truly lived in this complex and beautiful world.

In addition to calling the names of those who are no longer living in this world, All Saints' Day is a time to reflect on the fact that we will one day be the saints whose names are called. At the Women's Retreat a few weeks ago, we called the names of women, alive and dead, who were present with us in our hearts...and as we looked around the room at the six generations gathered, Cherry said, "I like to think my name will be called one day, and yours, in this space." And I echo that now, with all those present today—one day *your* name will be called as we honor the communion of saints. One day your name will be called, and your story will be told of how you loved this community into being; of how you lived generously and graciously; of how you never underestimated the power of showing up and kept showing up time and again to speak truth to power; of how you sang and played and worshipped and witnessed and shared the powerful indomitable love of the Holy with the world.

So as we call the names today of those who encouraged us to be our whole selves, and as we ponder the mystery of our names one day being called among the saints...church, what stories do we want to be told about us? What do we hope the ones who come after us will remember? Will they talk about how we fulfilled the legacy of this church in demonstrating for peace and an end to all war? Will they share musings on how we decried Christian nationalism or supported each other when we were in need or fed the hungry people living without roofs over their heads? Will they remember that we, too, took time to remember those who went before, and that we, too, knew deep in our bones that we existed as the dreams of the generations before us...and that they are our dreams come to fruition?

Beloved church, *we* are because *they* were. God so loved the cosmos that in a holy flirtation with the world, They placed among us those who raised us, encouraged us, shaped us, taught us, witnessed us; those peacemakers, those artists, those disrupters, those lovers, those leaders. In a holy flirtation with the world that called us to be the best we could be, God gave us the ones we now call saints: people of all races, genders, sexualities, nationalities, abilities, ages, languages...to remind the world of our potential to create justice and live into the kin-dom that is possible.

And so, look around at each other: we are the ones who are left. We go on living, carrying with us the legacy left to us by our forebears. We do not let them go quietly into the great beyond, but we speak their names as we remember their sacred, singular lives. We do not pretend they were perfect, or always right, or all-knowing...we dishonor them if we pretend so. We do not think their humanity a failure. Just as in the natural world, the fallen trees become nurse logs, giving life to the future forest, and so it is with us today, surrounded by the cloud of witnesses, the communion of saints.

I close today with a poem dear to my heart, Laura Gilpin's Life After Death IV (4):

The things I know:  
how the living go on living  
and how the dead go on living with them

So that in a forest  
even a dead tree casts a shadow  
and the leaves fall one by one  
and the branches break in the wind  
and the bark peels off slowly  
and the trunk cracks  
and the rain seeps in through the cracks  
and the trunk falls to the ground  
and the moss covers it

and in the spring the rabbits find it  
and build their nest inside  
and have their young  
and their young will live safely  
inside the dead tree

So that nothing is wasted in nature  
or in love.

May it ever be so. Amen.