



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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ALL SAINTS' DAY, NOVEMBER 1, 2020
REVELATION 7:9-17; PSALM 34:1-10, 22; MATTHEW 5: 1-12

YOU ARE THE BLESSED

Revelation 7:9-17 *[After this I, John, looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying, "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!" And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, singing, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen." Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?" I said to him, "Sir, you are the one that knows." Then he said to me, "These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. "For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."]*

Matthew 5:1-12 *[When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."]*

What are the readings? I love it when my daughter asks me that question. She sees me futzing about with poetry books and digging up stuff on the computer, and knows it's a preaching week for me, and then, not just to be polite, she asks me "what are the readings"

– and I know we're going to get into some good stuff.

I usually give her an abbreviated sketch of the Gospel – it's the one where Jesus does this and says that, and then see what comes up for her. But for this Sunday, I said, "It's the

Beatitudes: you know, blessed are the meek and all that. And it's Revelation." And I know she knows the Beatitudes, but as I started to give her a sketch of the passage from Revelation that we just heard, I stopped and opened the lectionary and read it, the whole thing, right down to:

*They will hunger no more, and thirst no more;
the sun will not strike them,
nor any scorching heat;
for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be
their shepherd,
and he will guide them to springs of the
water of life,
and God will wipe away every tear from their
eyes.*

And I got a little teary reading it, because "God will wipe away every tear from their eyes" is the promise I hold onto every day of my life.

And Kelsey sweetly touched my hand and said to me, "Well, then, they're the same."

The same?

"The readings are the same! It's the same list of promises, just that Revelation is flowery words. Jesus is saying, 'It's going to be okay,' and so is the voice in the dream in Revelation. All will be well."

Yes. Ye-es. They are the same! And I got to thinking about this more, and about the familiar lines of the Beatitudes. Blessed are the meek, the poor in spirit, those hungering for justice, and mourning, and trying to make peace in the midst of being reviled and persecuted. Blessed are you who are going

through the ordeal, THIS life's ordeal. LIFE is the "great ordeal" talked about in Revelation, but there the tears are no more, because the people are, in this Revelation dream, standing before the throne, and before Jesus, in person.

But wait, who was there in person when Jesus was preaching the Beatitudes? A crowd of regular *people*, going through the difficult ordeal that life in the Roman Empire was, difficult to the point that they followed this strange, itinerant preacher who was telling them of something else – something better, something deeper, something more important. And these people, too, were standing before Jesus IN PERSON, but right here on Earth. Again, I am struck with my daughter saying, "Well, then, the readings are the same." Because of Jesus' presence, and *in* Jesus' presence, the mourners shall be comforted.

Sure, Revelation sums it up as "the ordeal," but the incarnate, fully divine and fully *human* Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount looks at this hungry, seeking crowd of people before him, looks them in their very eyes, and names the ordeals: names the poverty, the loss, the grief, the injustice, the getting run-over rough-shod, the conflict... and then not as the blood of the Lamb, but with the very lifeblood in his human veins, tells them **they. are. blessed.** In the midst of all that. Because theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

So these are the readings in the lectionary for All Saints Day. Why? Are all those people perfect saints, this crowd gathered before Jesus so big that he had to go up on the mount

to preach to them? Matthew tells us Jesus has been going throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease among the people. And so his fame had spread to the point that great crowds followed him, literally with their feet, followed him.

Could they all have been saints? What if I tell you, yes? You know that phrase we say in the Nicene Creed and in renewing our Baptismal Covenant this day: “the communion of saints.” Well that’s them. And that’s us. And by “us,” I DO mean you and me.

We read in Revelation of people shining in their white robes, praising God and singing in joy, and that sounds more like saints to us, in our usage of the word “saints” nowadays. But in the Bible, the word “saint,” refers to a “holy one,” someone who is set apart for God’s special purposes. Well, that is every one of us created in the image of the God who knows every hair on our heads. Every individual person IS God’s special purpose! No person is less than God’s special purpose. No person is illegal; that’s impossible in God’s eyes. No person is worthless, or worth less; that’s impossible in God’s eyes. That is the truth and the promise that draws the crowd to Jesus, then and now.

When the apostle Paul writes those long letters to the far-flung churches he established, he refers to all the members as “the saints,” and Lord knows, Paul had his hands full with the continual shenanigans going in those churches. If behavior is all that

is meant by “saint,” well... yikes. And think about the great crowd gathered there for the Sermon on the Mount, listening to the Beatitudes in person. Could you set apart a more special purpose than to stand at the feet of Jesus, and listen to his radical teaching about upending the world of empire and power and oppression – with the meek and the hungry and the peacemakers?

Well, my fellow members of the communion of saints, that’s what we’re doing here today, too, right in communion with our beloved saints who’ve gone before us. Blessed are *you*, who follow and listen to Jesus and go about the work of upending the values of empire for the life-giving values of Jesus’ world... who are living through the great ordeal of this time – this time of pandemic and rampant racism, of fraught elections and unleashed and irrational hatred and fear – living through the ordeal trusting in the promise that we are blessed, and God will wipe every tear from our eyes. But not just waiting for that as a “someday.” Living into God’s promises NOW.

God is not promising us there won’t be tears. The shining, white-robed ones in the vision of Revelation have come through a great ordeal. The “blessed-are-you ones” Jesus names in the Beatitudes are the hurting people standing right there in front of him at the mountain, and they are the reviled and persecuted, mourning and hungry for justice. So yeah, there are tears. And Jesus is right there with them. And because Jesus is right here with **us**, there is also blessing, you

peacemakers, you justice-seekers, you mourners. There is blessing NOW, because we are walking with Jesus in the midst of it all, right now. The promise is not just that one day we'll be wearing shining robes and singing in God's presence. We're in God's presence now!

We've got Jesus telling us that living by the Beatitudes is doable. He didn't come and say this new, Beatitudes way is aspirational, only for "perfect" saints. He has stood among us and said DO IT. And in the doing is the comfort, the mercy, the being filled, the being called children of God. All of it. In the listening and the doing for each other, we realize the blessing of Jesus' way.

So Revelation reads: *Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?"* They are ALL OF US. And we have come from EVERYWHERE, the living and the dead together. We are the communion of saints. One body in Jesus. The poet Scott Jamison retells the Beatitudes¹:

LISTEN

*This is how it's going to be
Broken hearts will be held together
Grief will be out of a job for good
Pride will know the cold side of the door
What is right will be devoured
Bread will be broken with mercy
Purity will be the porchlight*

*And peace will be its moth and those
Who have known the back of hands
Will know every lifeline of my palm
This was how I had always planned.*

This was how God had always planned: that living in God's love, we would love one another this way. No one is NOT set apart as special by the God who created them. At our diocesan convention last week, Rev. Bradley Hauff described indigenous wisdom and justice as "seeing us all as relatives." That's what the communion of saints is. In our faith, we are comforted in the prayer that we, the living and dead, are one family. And we're quick to claim the dead – yet slow to claim our neighbor – as relative." He names our prejudices and divisions so truly. But I believe in God's promise. I believe in the communion of saints, blessed right here in your company, all relatives – and in the company of the beloved dead, and in the presence of the God who loves us all.

Let's go live it, live with the full joy of Revelation, as God's meek, merciful, justice-seeking, peace-making, and shining saints, at the polls this week, on social media, out in public in our masks that protect others, in the company of people different from us.

You don't have to become a perfect saint to stand with Jesus. You are saint; you ARE in the company of Jesus. Blessed are you. Live that way.

¹ Scott Jamison, "Listen," downloaded Oct. 30, 2020 at <https://stocki.typepad.com/soulsurmise/2012/03/the-beatitude-poems.html>