

“The Saints of God”
November 6, 2022

Zechariah 1:1-26
Hebrews 11:32-12:2

On first hearing, the words of Zechariah seem fitting for this All Saints Sunday: “Your ancestors, where are they? And the prophets, do they live forever?”

The questions remind us that we are dust and to dust we shall return. As we sang earlier this morning, “Time, like an ever flowing stream, soon bears us all away.”

By faith, we hear nothing grim in either those questions or those answers. Instead, we give thanks that out of the infinity of space and time, we are here, now, that we might rejoice and be glad in this day and in every day that we are given by such a gracious God. We are here, now, to love and to be loved, to give and to receive, to flourish and to work for even greater human flourishing.

Yes, like the prophets, our ancestors—and our ancestors in faith—did not live forever. Nor shall we, though in life and in death we belong to God.

So, we the living remember.

We do this all the time as individuals.

A day such as this allows us to engage our common memory, to recall especially those who lived among this congregation: Denny and Jerry, Claire and Donna, as well as Diana and Wayne, who sat and sang and prayed with us in these pews, who drank coffee and ate with us in Rockwood Hall, who laughed and lamented and hoped and worked with us. They showed us how to live in days like these and encouraged us to prepare to live into the future.

Through illness and difficulty, in the face of loss and death, they loved family and friends; they loved this life and this world. They kept their covenant with this congregation, walking with us in the ways of Jesus Christ. We give thanks for the unique witness of each these beloved members because in living and in dying, they showed us how to live in hope.

We are faithful people, not in isolation but in community. By the grace and mercy of the living God, that community extends not only in space but also through time. We are united in faith and struggle with those who came before us just as we are united with those who come after us.

The world tells us that a chasm is fixed between the living and the dead. In faith we speak of the communion of the saints. All are one in God, for all are held in God’s eternal care.

We are surrounded by this great cloud of witnesses, surrounded by Claire, Donna, Diana, Wayne, Denny, and Jerry, surrounded by those whom you have been thinking about while I have been talking, those who are with you still.

They engaged fully in life with all its possibilities and challenges, taking life as it came to them. They failed and succeeded, they hurt and they healed.

On first hearing, then, those words of Zechariah appropriately call us to remembrance, to thanksgiving and into an awareness of the great cloud of witnesses that surrounds us.

Listen more closely, however, and you might indeed wonder why I would have chosen this prophet and these words for this day. “The Lord was very angry with your ancestors. Therefore, say to them, Thus says the Lord of hosts: Return to me...and I will return to you....Do not be like your ancestors, to whom the former prophets proclaimed, “Return from your evil ways and from your evil deeds.”

Wait a minute! Aren’t we talking about Wayne and Diana, about Donna and Claire, about Jerry and Denny?

Well, yes. And this is the point: if we call them “saints,” it is not because they lived perfect or even exemplary lives—although there is much in each of their lives that we might want to imitate. But this day is not about remembering perfection.

We Congregationalists, like Protestants in general, do not canonize or pray to saints, but we look to these towering figures of our heritage and our lives for inspiration and encouragement in our own Christian journey. We recognize that the word *saint* applies to all who follow the living Christ. And in faith we recognize that there is an “enduring communion between the living and the dead in Christ.”ⁱ

As is usually the case, I can better understand this unseen, spiritual reality by looking at what I can see. This time of year, the trees help me.

At sunset a couple of weeks ago the trees around here took on a gold color that suggested an almost heavenly reality.

With the rain of recent days, however, most of the leaves are gone. “We blossom and flourish like leaves on the tree,” the hymn tells us. Then, addressing God, it tells of our destiny: “And wither and perish but naught changeth thee.”

How does the reality that we wither and perish inform us as we blossom and flourish?

We know, we understand, the beauty of trees. Perhaps you feel a certain sadness when the leaves fall. Perhaps you feel a certain peace—a sense that it is good and right.

The trees that we know provide a key to the mysteries that are harder to understand.

“A tree gives glory to God by being a tree,” Thomas Merton wrote. “For in being what God means it to be it is obeying God. The more a tree is like itself, the more it is like God. If it tries to be like something else which it was never intended to be, it would be less like God and therefore it would give God less glory.”

Perhaps we can say that the blaze of autumnal color that swept through here in recent weeks was the result of the worship each tree gives to its Creator. The brilliance and the death and falling of each leaf is a part of a tree being a tree—being itself and therefore giving glory to God.

Merton continues: “For me to be a saint means to be myself. Therefore, the problem of salvation is in fact the problem of finding out who I am and of discovering my true self. Trees and animals have no problem. God makes them who they are without consulting them.

“With us it is different. God leaves us free to be whatever we like. We can be ourselves or not—as we please.”

For me to be a saint means to be myself. This is what we have learned from each of those whom we remember—not perfection, but being themselves, encouraging us to be ourselves before God. Think of the saints in your own life—the women and men whose lives were marked not so much by goodness as by an honesty of self. Chances are they weren't people interested in showing you how religious they were. There were people who increasingly were themselves before God—letting God's goodness flow through them and being transformed by it. They were people who expressed in their lives who they were before God.

The brilliant light of their living and their dying gave glory to God. The more they were themselves, the more we are ourselves, the more God becomes known in this world.

In Jesus Christ we hear the astonishing news that we are accepted and loved by God—as we are. Secure in that knowledge, you are set free to be yourself—to be a saint in the truest sense: not so much perfect as persevering; not one who has arrived, but a pilgrim on life's journey.

So, it is fitting to hear from Zechariah this morning—and accept once more the invitation to return to God that God might return to us.

You see, we remember those who have come before and as the author of the Letter to the Hebrews affirms, the saints triumphant eagerly await our own efforts for the gospel that they might receive the promise, for they would not, they will not, apart from us and our work, be made perfect. Peter Gomes once wrote: “The story is not over even for them, for you and I are yet part of the process of redemption and it is will not be accomplished without us. God has not created us simply to be onlookers to [God's] great work and that of [God's] servants, but to be participants in that work.”ⁱⁱ

And that work, of course, is unfinished.

It is our work in this time and this place. We will live and work so that the hungry are fed and the homeless are sheltered and deep wounds are healed for the sake of God's love revealed in Jesus Christ. And if we are successful in this work, that is, in making clear that we worship and serve a living God, by the grace of that God our children and their children will continue running the race set before them and us, knowing that they, too, are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses—all of us looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.

ⁱ J. Moltmann, quoted in Polkinghorne, *The God of Hope and the End of the World*, pg. 109.

ⁱⁱ Gomes, *Sermons*, pg. 229