



SAFE AT HOME - THE SAINTS WIN BIG
Revelations 21:1-16
Revelations 22:21

It has been said that the two greatest fears of life are the fear of dying and the fear of living. These two fears conveniently cover everything on our list. There is told of a tombstone somewhere in the mid-West that reads as follows:

**Pause stranger when you pass me by.
As you are now, so once was I.
As I am now, so will you be
So prepare for death and follow me.**

Someone came along and added these lines:

**To follow you I am not content
Until I know which way you went!**

Perhaps some of you who are Star Trekkies like my wife and I remember the words from Admiral Kirk: "How we deal with death is at least as important as how we deal with life."

When the famous agnostic Robert Ingersoll died, the printed funeral program left this solemn instruction, "There will be no singing."

Few feel like singing in the face of death. Running, perhaps. Crying, probably. But singing? Not at death. Death steals our reason to sing. Death takes the songs from our lips and leaves in their place stilled tongues and tear-flooded cheeks. (1) Yes, you wonder which way he went.

However this attitude about death is so different from the one described in the pages of Holy Scripture. **In Psalm 116:15, it declares, "precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His Saints." Also in First Corinthians, Chapter 2:9, it declares, "no eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love Him."**

As the writer, Max Lucado, shares, "God has been known to plan a celebration in the midst of a cemetery. God appearing at the strangest places doing the strangest of things. Stretching smiles where there had only hung frowns. Placing twinkles where there

were only tears. Hanging a bright star in a dark sky. Arching rainbows in the midst of thunder clouds. Jesus calling names in a cemetery." (2)

Some of you who are avid baseball fans remember the name of Dick Howser. Dick was a baseball player who eventually came to manage the Kansas City Royals. He led them to be World Champions in 1985. One year after that he managed in the All Star game. He felt sick for a time before the game and shortly thereafter he sought medical attention. He was diagnosed with a brain tumor. He fought it tough, but he died about a year later.

He was a dedicated Christian believer. He did not hide his faith in the face of political correctness or sports competition. They held his funeral at a Baptist Church. There was great singing. It was a fitting send-off for such a good man. However, one of the sports columnists said it best when the following headline appeared over his obituary, "Dick Howser is Safe at Home Base." You do not have to guess which way Dick Howser went.

Week after week, we share together in the historic words of the Apostles' Creed: (We) I believe in the Communion of Saints.....Do we really? What is it about this day that our founder and spiritual mentor John Wesley described in his journal as a day of "triumphant joy." He had a special fondness for this holy day.

What was there about this day that gave John Wesley and many other believers faith for living rather than a fear of dying? Let me share four observations for your consideration today.

FIRST, ALL SAINTS' DAY IS A TIME FOR HOLY USE OF THE POWER OF REMEMBRANCE.

This day reminds us that we are here today because of the faithful work and witness of a group of people who often were counted unimportant by Rome. However, they were used by God to build a kingdom that has outlasted all the great kingdoms of our world. Remember, Rome is now only a faint scribble on the pages of history books and it is Jesus Christ - not Caesar - who is our judge and king.

We search the rich soil of the past not to study history as much as to blaze a new history into the present moment. Dr. Ernest F. Tittle, a preaching giant of yesterday, said it best:

Continuity with a great and heroic past does not require that the children shall believe exactly as the parents believed or that they shall do exactly as the parents did. What it does require is that in their time the children shall be as nobly devoted to great causes as were the parents to the great causes of their time. For those of

us who claim as our spiritual father John Wesley the question is, not what Wesley said or did in the eighteenth century, but what a person like John Wesley would probably say and do in the twenty-first century. (3)

In this spirit Will Willimon is right when he shares "Remembrance is a potentially revolutionary act." We United Methodists have a rich heritage that we should not forget. It might put some steel in the spine for us to be salt, light, and leaven for God in this time.

The Apostle John writes this letter which we read together today to a people who are discouraged and ready to give up.

From this letter we learn that the outcome of the world is certain - God is always sovereign and in control. This is worth remembering!

In Rome, it was not popular to be a Christian. The Caesars were considered divine by the general public and demanded to be worshipped. Often today, it is said, "It isn't easy being a Christian!" It never was. The catacombs of Rome attest to the challenge of being a Christian. The amphitheaters demonstrate their earthly fate. However, their deaths were only the seed-bed of a greater revolution that will overtake the Roman Empire. This revolution began by Jesus can continue today if we tap into the power and follow the footsteps of those who have gone before us. We can learn from their mistakes, but also learn from the legacy that has brought us to this moment in time.

SECONDLY, ALL SAINTS' DAY REMINDS US THAT OUR EARTHLY JOURNEY ONLY POINTS TO SOMETHING GREATER AND GRANDER FOR THOSE WHO PLACE FAITH IN JESUS CHRIST.

The distinguished Christian pastor Dr. D. James Kennedy recently went to his heavenly home. At his service of celebration – he instructed the service to begin with the singing of the “Doxology.” The service then included a number of the great hymns of our faith. Then he instructed the service to end with the singing of the “Hallelujah Chorus.” He asked people not to cry or mourn at his service. He said, “Don’t believe I have died – because in heaven I will be more alive than I ever was before.”

D. James Kennedy wanted people to know that God is always in charge. Our earthly journey is only a reminder that our true home is always in Heaven. We give up our existence in this second class hotel for the Beauty of Heaven.

In our opening hymn it shares, **“We feebly struggle – they in glory shine.”**

This is why we stand boldly and confidently at a graveside and stand squarely on the promise of the word of God when it declares:

**"O Death - Where is thy sting?
"O Grave - Where is thy victory?"**

So we believe that the Christian believer does not simply pass on - but we pass on to be with Him forever. This is the truth that pulsates from Scripture today in Revelation 21:1-6. There will be a New Jerusalem! God himself will wipe away our tears. Death will be no more. Talk about something being greater and grander. Nothing can come close. Yes, we know what way they went. The Saints help us to remember this truth. Death is more friend than foe.

Dr. D. James Kennedy, like many others, is part of the Church Triumphant, that communion of saints who live eternally with Christ. They remain in that communion until the day when Christ returns and we share in the great gift of the new heaven and new earth promised in our lesson from **Revelation 21** today.

THIRDLY, ALL SAINTS' DAY REMINDS US THAT CHRISTIAN WORSHIP IN SOME MARVELOUS BUT MYSTERIOUS WAY UNITES HEAVEN AND EARTH.

It was Dr. R. Maurice Boyd who shares, "The Church may be only two or three gathered together in His name; but by God's arithmetic they are an innumerable company as earth and Heaven are joined, and the Church, militant on earth, triumphant in Heaven, is one."

"This means that at any service or worship it is easy to count our faces, but impossible to count our number. Think of that glorious company of Heaven that joins us in our praise today.

It includes us, but also angels and archangels, and the noble army of martyrs, the goodly fellowship of the prophets, and saints and heroes out of every nation and generation who fought the good fight, and kept the faith, and finished their course. The Church on earth is only a fragment of the whole Church which joins earth and Heaven." (4)

Today as we sing our hymns in this church sanctuary - we join our voices in harmony with the many centuries of Christian worshippers.

On occasion we sing the hymn, "Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee." The fourth stanza declares: **"Mortals join the mighty chorus - which the morning stars began."**

I believe Charles Wesley says it best:

**"The Church triumphant in thy love
their mighty joys we know
They sing the Lamb in hymns above
And we in hymns below."**

It is Jesus Christ who alone bridges the generations - holding us all together - past,

present, future, in His hands.

When we worship, Hebrews 12:1 tells us ***"that we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses."***

In the communion liturgy are these words: **"Therefore with angels and archangels, and with all the company of Heaven, we laud and magnify thy glorious name, joining our voices with them saying..."**

Yes, the early church fathers and mothers were right that every time we enter the sacred space of the sanctuary, we are not alone. It is as though the saints look down from heaven and instruct us to "keep on - keeping on."

The Saints still worship God but now in a greater and purer Light and Land!

LASTLY, ALL SAINTS' DAY REMINDS US THAT GOD DOES ULTIMATELY SETTLE HIS ACCOUNT.

Dr. Joe A. Harding, once shared a conversation he once heard on a radio station that was describing the play-by-play action of a game being played in the Seattle Kingdom Stadium between the Seattle Seahawks and the New Orleans Saints. It was late in the fourth quarter. It looked like the Hawks were going to win. However, the Saints got one more chance. A few plays were successful. Anticipation was growing. The announcer said: "The Saints are marching down the field. The Saints are playing together. It now looks like the **Saints** are going to win big in the Kingdom!"

That is exactly the message of this day. The Saints win big!

Unlike Robert Ingersoll and other atheists and agnostics - we believers in Jesus Christ love to sing - even at funerals.

Hold on to the promises of God we sing with confidence:

**In our end is our beginning; in our time, infinity;
in our doubt there is believing; in our life, eternity.
In our death, a resurrection; at the last, a victory,
unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.**

The Saints win big!

Amen and Amen.

Reverend Eric S. Ritz

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ENDNOTES

1. Max Lucado, Six Hours One Friday, Multnomah Press, 1989, p. 153.
2. IBID., p. 162.
3. Thanks to Dr. Emery A. Percell for sharing this material. This is my adaptation of it.
4. R. Maurice Boyd, Corridors of Light, Colonsay House, Hamilton, Ontario, 1991, p. 161.
5. The United Methodist Hymnal, The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989, Hymn No. 707, "Hymn of Promise," 3rd stanza.