

A Future Worth Hoping For

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Texts: Isaiah 25: 6-9

Thanks be to God for these words of life.

I have heard a lot of preachers through the years who could benefit from being reminded that less is more. Prince Philip, husband of Queen Elizabeth, put it best when he said, “the mind cannot absorb what the backside cannot endure.” I start with that today mostly as a reminder to myself, because I feel that this day calls for *so much*. There is so much to acknowledge together, to reflect upon together, to celebrate together, and frankly, to worry about together. I note five such threads that deserve attention today: It is All Saints Sunday, a day to honor, to dwell in the presence of, those who have embodied the way of Jesus in this world, making his way a little clearer for us. It is Communion Sunday, a day to receive the gifts of God for the people of God, to be an all-inclusive people of an all-inclusive God, receiving the gift of grace that is so real we taste it. It is, I feel compelled to say as the Interim Pastor, trying to help you in this moment of transition and opportunity, a day on which we begin to speak of finances, of the hopes of this congregation and generosity that is needed to bring those hopes to life. It is a day, I am feeling, of many heavy hearts, of beloved ones in this congregation living through illness, depression, fraught relationships, grief, heavy loads. And it is a day, sadly, just before an election in which it seems the best we can muster is a desperate hope that our country will not fall into turmoil, government control of, or even assaults on people we love, geez on us – women, immigrants, gay, lesbian, trans people, queer in whatever way, and on any who join together as their allies.

Each of these threads calls out to be held up, side by side with our sacred story, unpacked, examined, hopefully enlightened, and integrated anew into our lives and faith. And even though we have cushions on all the pews helping the endurance capacity of your backside, I don't dare offer five sermons today. Rather, I want to weave our five threads together into a single cord, and hopefully that cord will help us with each of its threads.

Here's how I see the unity in our five threads today:

All Saints Day we dwell in the presence of those who have embodied the way of Jesus in this world, making his way a little clearer for us. The saints, whether named of old, or dimly recognized in our day, do not embody moral perfection or theological brilliance or even unflinching faith. I would argue that what the saints had and have is a glimpse of a future worth hoping for, a glimpse that guided and guides them not to be holy, but to do the next right thing. The Lord's Supper that we celebrated today is a remembrance of Jesus' final meal with his disciples, but our look back to that meal rightly is like looking back through a window in which we see a future worth hoping for, a future of the cosmos healed and restored by the unfathomable love of God.

When the church starts talking about finances, the past gets plenty of attention. Here's the history of our budget, lots of deficits, lots of needed cuts, lots of asks for more giving. These realities almost anchor us in the past and make a new day hard to envision. But the generosity that is called for from this congregation is a generosity inspired by a future worth hoping for. We can't move forward without gratitude for the past, but your giving is far more about the future, a future that beckons you forward.

The difficult situations and heavy hearts among us right now also call us to glimpse a future worth hoping for, a future in which God, like a brilliant jazz improvisationalist, takes up the discordant notes our lives, and embraces them, works them around, surrounds them, and finally helps us see them as part of a gracious whole.

And this election, oh this election: I am tempted to officially declare this sanctuary now to be scream room so we can all just let out the fear and anxiety – but I'm not sure the walls could take the intensity. This election though is also about a future worth hoping for. Without daring to minimize the potential harm that the former president could inflict upon the fabric of this nation if elected again, and while some of you may not appreciate the equanimity of this statement, no matter who the next president is, our job is the same. It is to accept God's call to the persistent, courageous, mostly incremental work inspired by a future worth hoping for.

As much as Christianity is grounded and rooted in history and tradition, as much as we draw on a scriptural story that comes to us from nearly 2000 years ago, as much as theology tries to plumb the depths of our inheritance, as much as we love our 388 year history as First Church, as much I value the two months I have been around, as much as you value the year, or 20 years, or 60something years you have been around, in spite of all of that, Christianity is about the future, the future that God is unfolding, and which cannot be held back.

Last year on All Saints Day my colleague Emma preached a wonderful, rich sermon based in her experience of the Tz'utujil Maya people and their understanding of the interplay of this world and the world of the ancestors. Even if you remember the sermon, you probably don't remember that it was actually based on the book of Revelation, which she acknowledged was an interesting challenge in a congregation not prone to talk of beasts and battles and the whore of Babylon. Her passage though was from Revelation 7, which includes this phrase,

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.

If that sounds familiar, good for you, for my scripture reading earlier is still ringing in your ears. That final image from Revelation 7 is drawn from what was then already an ancient text, that of the prophet Isaiah, who wrote hundreds of years earlier:

On this mountain God Almighty will make for all peoples
a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines,
of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.
And God will destroy on this mountain

the shroud that is cast over all peoples,
the covering that is spread over all nations;
God will swallow up death forever.
Then God Almighty will wipe away the tears from all faces,
and the disgrace of the people God will take away from all the earth,

Such incredible visions of God's tenderness and love and loving-power and abundance, are not just meant to provide a passive hope for what will be in the future, a sort of distant picture meant to sustain us while we wait it out in the terrible place.

Both in the book of Revelation and in Isaiah, these are glimpses of the future that draw us forward toward a beauty otherwise unknown. Like a sculptor sees a work of art dwelling inside a hunk of stone, and then simply chips away what doesn't need to be there to reveal the new creation, so the glimpse we get of this future draws us forward, guiding every part of who we are, and how we live and move in the world.

All Saints Day, Communion, generosity, the heavy burdens we bear, and this worrisome election, they all call us to be grounded not in the past, but in God's vision of the future, a future in which all share in a feast of fabulous food with well- aged wines, and thus they call us to make that real now.

A future in which God destroys the shroud that is cast over all nations; and in which God will swallow up death forever, a vision which calls us to be people who swallow up every form of death we possibly can in this world, and triumph over it with resurrection.

A future in which God Almighty will wipe away the tears from all faces, a vision which calls *us* to wipe tears from each other's eyes, and allow the tears to be wiped from our own.

A vision which God will take away the disgrace, the shame, from all people of the earth, so we are called to be people who take away that shame as well.
My friends, God is creating a beautiful, wondrous, divine future, and we are the people called to live into that future each and every day of lives. It is indeed a future worth hoping for, a future worth living for.

Thanks be to God. Amen.