

Sermon

Nov. 5, 2017

All Saints Sunday

Based on Revelation 7:9-17

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Today is All Saints Sunday, a day when we remember those who have died. On this day we are called to claim the hope that one day we will join them in heaven, that we will see them again. It is a day when we confront the mystery of what happens to us after we die.

Death, of course, is not a mystery. It is an experience that all of us will have some day. But what that experience is like, and what happens after we die, that is a mystery. With the exception of those few who have had life after death experiences, who talk about seeing a bright light or seeing angels, no one can talk about their experience of death and what happens after.

Because we cannot hear from those who have experienced death for themselves, we are left with having to imagine what it might be like. We have to speculate. We go to religions, philosophies, visionaries and artists to describe for us what death is like and what life after death is like. These experiences have to be imagined. We can't go there and come back to see for ourselves. No expeditionary team can venture to the other side and return to tell us what it's going to be like. We can only imagine.

I want to talk about the gift of imagination. I believe God has given us the ability, the gift, to imagine. God uses this ability of imagination, working through our imagination in order to comfort us in our times of loss and grief, and to encourage us to overcome the ordeals we must endure. God does this by inspiring in our imaginations what it will be like when we get through our tough times, or when we pass through the veil and walk on those heavenly shores. God works through our imagination so that we can live our lives with hope that there is something better for us, that the momentary trials we go through are not worth comparing to the great rejoicing we will experience some day. We can imagine what those days of rejoicing will be.

Imagination is a powerful ability. Every great invention, from light bulbs to airplanes, was first imagined. The inventor had to have in their minds an image of what they were going for. Every work of art, from paintings, to symphonies, movies, plays or novels, are all presentations of imagination. Art is the expression of imagination. The source of much of our worries and anxieties has to do with what we imagine might happen. We lay in bed fretting and worrying, running through our minds all kinds of possible scenarios of doom, imagining all the possibilities of what might go wrong.

What we imagine might happen may be possible. We can imagine that our house burned down while we were away on vacation. That is certainly possible. On a lighter note, we can imagine that we will have snow on Christmas Eve this year. In Ohio that is certainly possible. But in both of these examples we imagine what is possible, not what is assured. We won't know for sure what we imagined will come to pass until we come home and find our house to be a pile of ashes or we wake up the morning of Christmas Eve and see a beautiful blanket of snow. Until then, all we imagine are possibilities.

When it comes to what happens after we die, people have imagined all kinds of possibilities. Some have imagined that there will be no experience at all. The lights will go out. It will be the end of us. It will all be over. Fade to black. Others have imagined that our souls will leave these bodies and inhabit other bodies, reincarnate and live again and again and again. Others have imagined that we will enter into a long sleep until one day we will awake and arise on the day of resurrection. Is this why in coffins the body has its head on a pillow and the covers pulled up? Others imagine that we will be together with our loved ones in heaven after we die. There won't be a long sleep. It will happen like a blink of an eye when we depart this life. This is the one I go with.

But what will heaven be like? The well-known Christian music group wrote a popular song about that entitled "I Can Only Imagine." It's true. We can only imagine what heaven will be like. My early imagining of what heaven will be like was given to me by Looney Tunes. After Sylvester the cat gets blown up somehow by something Tweety bird did, he finds himself sitting on a cloud wearing a white robe

with a gold ring over his head playing a harp. Then there is the movie “O, God” with John Denver and George Burns who played the role of God. Early in the movie, Denver’s character dies and he goes to heaven, which is imagined as a white space, where he is wearing all white clothes from his shirt to his shoes. He hears the voice of God talking to him, and then the George Burns God shows up, complete with those big glasses and a cigar.

After my parents passed away, I had a dream one time. I was walking through a wood on a sunny afternoon. I then came out into a clearing, a vast space of green grass with mountains in the distance. The sun was bright and the sky was a dark blue. And I saw a vast number of people wearing white robes. And then I looked and standing there was my mom, my dad, and Jesus. The four of us joined hands, making a circle. Filled with joy we danced around. It was a powerful image that I am convinced God gave me. God used my imagination to give me a powerful sense of comfort in my time of grief. It was an imagination of what heaven will be like. What do you imagine heaven will be like?

John, the one who gave us the Revelation, had an amazing capacity to imagine. Reading his descriptions of the images that God revealed to him, of strange looking creatures, dragons and beasts, lakes of fire, streets of gold, it is as if he imagined in color while we imagine in black and white. Tons of ink has been spilled trying to understand and interpret these images that John describes in the Revelation.

Today we heard of one of his imaginative descriptions. Now I say imaginative on purpose. I am not suggesting that what John saw was imaginary, that is, not real or some kind of fantasy. Remember what I said earlier? The electric light bulb would not have existed unless it was first imagined. Every work of art was first imagined. If Leonardo da Vinci did not first imagine the image of the Mona Lisa or imagined the scene of the Last Supper he would not have painted it. Those images were real *in his mind*. He had to only put those real images on canvas. When it comes to John’s images of heaven, the church affirms that they are real. John used descriptive language that inspires us to imagine what his visions looked like. John is painting a picture with words. We get to

participate, using our imaginations guided by John's words to get pictures of heaven in our minds.

So imagine looking upon a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, saying, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" Wow! Can't you picture it in your mind? Does this image stir something inside of you? This is a glorious and powerful image that God gave John and we receive in our own imaginations.

There's another great thing about imagination. It allows us to participate. Take for example Civil War reenactments. Guided by the pictures and stories of those times, people dress up and participate in these re-creations. These Civil War buffs imagine what it would have been like to be there. Kids play dress up. They dress up like moms or dads, nurses or police officers, and participate in what they imagine what it is like to be a mom or dad, a nurse or a police officer.

I remember this powerful preacher once tell a story of when they were kids they would sneak into the sanctuary of the little church they went to when no one was around. Then she would step up into the pulpit and imagine that she was the preacher before a full house. And then she would go at it, preaching up a storm, imaginatively participating in what she saw the preachers of her church doing. And now it happens in real life. Those people packing the sanctuary she imagined as a girl actually happens now while she still preaches up a storm.

How might we, even now, imaginatively participate in this vision that John was given by God of heaven, in which a multitude, wearing their white robes and holding palm branches, are gathered around the throne? We could play dress up, like cosplay. Have you heard of cosplay? It's a contraction of the words "costume play." People dress up as their favorite characters and then get together and play those roles. I don't know much about it but it's like dressing up for adults. So we could take John's cues and put on white robes, get our palm branches, and walk down the streets of Columbus as a group shouting out that salvation belongs to our God. We could do that. But that would probably

be a bit too much of drawing attention to ourselves. People may not understand what we are up to.

We could simply hold in our minds this image and daydream about it. We could put ourselves there in our minds eye. We could join that throng and allow ourselves to be moved by the imaginary experience. I wonder if this may be part of why John wrote this down. He chose to use this descriptive language for the purpose of activating our imaginations so that we would form these images in our minds, and allow those images to stir us up on the inside, giving us comfort and hope while we pass through our own great ordeals.

Here's another way to imaginatively participate. We can take this image that John has given us and lay it over our participation in holy communion this morning. Imagine it. The multitude from every nation, tribe and tongue is represented in that people all over the world, of many nations and many languages, are participating in holy communion this morning. We come to the table as forgiven people, cleansed from the stain of sin by the atoning blood of Jesus as this great multitude had their robes washed in the blood of the Lamb. At the center of this table is bread which represents for us the presence of Jesus our God, the Lamb that was slain, just as this great multitude gathered around the throne upon which sat the Lamb.

Today, as we participate in holy communion, let us imagine that we are participating in the worship that is happening in heaven. Imagine that we are joined by those who are there waiting for us, that in some mysterious way they are present with us in this space. Let us imagine it until the day comes that we will be wearing our robes, holding our palm branches, and adding our voices to the countless multitude, shouting our praises to our God who is our salvation. Imagine it.