

Eve of All Saint's (All Saints' Observance), Year B, Proper of All Saints
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St Paul's Episcopal Church, Key West, FL
October 31, 2021
Isaiah 25:6-9
Psalm 24
Revelation 21:1-6a
John 11:32-44

Communion of Saints

Last evening as the sun went down, the old spiritual year ended. With everything going on around here, that might have slipped by us. But, according to the ancient Celtic calendar, last evening at sunset, the old spiritual year ended. On the old Celtic calendar, today, tomorrow, and Tuesday—October 31 through November 2—are known as “the 72 hours between the years.” The new spiritual year begins at nightfall on November 2. These three days also mark the beginning of Celtic winter in the northern hemisphere.

The marking of these three days as the end of year/new year in the Celtic world reaches back to the time before Christ. Although we don't know how many centuries ago these observances began, the first written record of them is from the first century BCE. These days of October 31 to November 2 were observed by Celtic peoples in what are now Ireland, Scotland, Wales, other parts of Britain, northern France, northern Spain, and much of the rest of Europe.

The three days, the 31st, 1st, and 2nd, are the festival of Samhain (pronounced “Sow-in” in Ireland and on the Isle of Man and pronounced either “Sav-in” or “Sow-een” in Scotland).

During these 72 hours between the years, the Druid priests of the Celts presided over all manner of rituals and practices designed to move the summer peacefully into winter, and the season of greater light into the season of greater dark. Great bonfires were built. Animals and crops were sacrificed on them sometimes as offerings.

The veil between the worlds was understood to be exceptionally thin during these three days. Spirits, both benevolent and malevolent, good'uns and bad'uns, would have an easier time than usual moving between the worlds. Frightening costumes were worn to ward off any evil spirits that might come near, and candles were placed in carved-out pumpkins or turnips to help good spirits and one's ancestors to find their way home.

The Celts affirmed that in this three-day interval the dead could more easily cross from the next world back across the threshold to this world. They expected to be visited in this time by those who had gone before. They understood that, especially at this time, ancestors were nearby and waiting to be asked for help.

By the year 500, Christianity had reached most of the Celtic world. Even among those who became Christians, the practices of Samhain (“Sow-in”) remained strong. Concerned that these celebrations were pagan and somehow detrimental to these Celtic Christians, the Church attempted to Christianize the festival. November 1 was created as All Saints Day in the year 835. In the tenth century, November 2 was standardized as All Souls Day to commemorate all the faithful departed, even if they were not officially canonized as proper “saints.”

Today on October 31, the first day of the ancient festival of Samhain (“Sow-in”) and the Eve of All Saints Day (All Hallows Eve), we at St Paul’s are combining our All Saints and All Souls commemorations.

Today we remember all the official, canonized saints who are exemplars for us of many Christian virtues and holy ideals. And we remember and give thanks for the lives and examples of all those whom we love but see no longer. Particularly, we give thanks for and offer prayers for those who have died in this past year and throughout this long, strange pandemic season of the past two years.

In both these commemorations of famous saints and more personal saints we celebrate the fuller fellowship of what we affirm (in the baptismal covenant and the Apostle’s Creed, at a minimum) as our belief in the communion of saints.

One way to think of these saints, both official and unofficial, who have preceded us in death is as our forebears, our ancestors in life and faith. They are nearby and waiting to be asked for help.

Like Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, they have marked the course before us. They have passed on, not away, for their lives have changed, not ended.

They have joined that “great cloud of witnesses” described in the Epistle to the Hebrews. United Methodist bishop Will Willimon calls them “the bleacher people”: they are in the celestial stands rooting for those of us who are still on our earthly pilgrimage. They are active encouragers. They are on our side. They are “the company of heaven;” we join our praise not only with that of angels and

archangels but with theirs. In a very real sense, we are all gathered together at the altar each time we celebrate the Eucharist.

Another way to think of the saints who have gone before is as icons, as images of the holy. It doesn't mean they were perfect. It means everyone and everyone's life has something to teach us. It means that each of us and all of them as humans bear God's image.

We add our prayers to theirs. We can ask their help. We can emulate their examples. They are concerned about us, and we are connected to them.

For all the saints and all the faithful departed, we pray, as the prayer book says, that they "may go from strength to strength in a new life of perfect service." We rest in the knowledge that they pray for us and intercede for us even as we pray for them.

We are connected to them and to one another in this communion of saints, this lifegiving, wisdom-bearing reality of our bonds to one another in Christ, bonds that cannot be ended—not even by death.

All of us who are baptized into Christ's life, death, and resurrection are part of the communion of saints. And this is one of the reasons why our All Saints commemoration is one of the times each year that we reaffirm our baptismal covenant, even if no one is to be baptized on that occasion.

Today, however, someone will be baptized. Today is the first birthday of Troy Paul Clawson. And today we will initiate him into this "fellowship of love and prayer" we call the communion of saints. His parents and godparents will make promises to bring him up in the Christian faith, to help guide him to the love and knowledge of Christ Jesus.

All the rest of us are called to support them and Troy in that endeavor and to help Troy understand that he lives in God's world "surrounded by the witness of all the saints to God's power and mercy." From this day forward, he will be sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ's own forever. From this day forward, he is part of the communion of saints, this mystical bond that connects us to those who have gone before, to one another, and to those who are yet to come.

And so we say, thanks be to God for all the saints.