

The Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost, Year C
The Reverend D. S. Mote, PhD
St Paul's Episcopal Church, Key West, FL
November 6, 2022
Daniel 7:1-3, 15-18
Psalm 149
Ephesians 1:11-23
Luke 6:20-31

Communion of Saints

It's a new year. Did you know? At least, according to the old Celtic calendar, it's a new year. And according to that calendar, it's also now Celtic winter in the northern hemisphere. Doesn't it feel like winter here in the northern hemisphere?

Once again we have moved through the days of October 31, November 1, and November 2, the three days known for centuries in the Celtic world as "the 72 hours between the years." Time out of time; three days when the world resets. The new church year will begin on the first Sunday of Advent, but, in Celtic thinking, it's a new year since the sun came up on November 3. Or, really, since the sun went down on November 2. For in Celtic thinking, as in that of many of the world's cultures, there is evening and morning, and that makes a day.

The marking of these three days as the end of year/new year in the Celtic world reaches back far before the time of 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, November 1, 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 Celtic world.

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). And since the majority of my ethnic heritage is Scottish, I'm gonna say "Sow-een."

During these 72 hours between the years, the Druid priests of the Celts—remember, hundreds and hundreds of years before Christ—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, that is, good'uns and bad'uns, would have an easier time than usual moving back and forth 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. Does any of that sound familiar? We've been doing it a long time.

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. And since they expected to be visited by those who had gone before, I'm guessing that they were thinking a lot about those who had gone before, whose stories they knew. 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-eeen") remained strong. They weren't gonna give 'em up. 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, November 6, on the first Sunday after All Saints Day, as the prayer book allows, we here at St Paul's and many Episcopalians across the country and Anglicans around the world are commemorating All Saints and All Souls together on this first Sunday after All Saints Day. We combine our commemorations of the official saints and of all the faithful departed.

And so, this day in particular, 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 and influences of persons dear to us who might not be official saints but who have shaped us into the people that we are. Particularly, we give thanks for and offer prayers for those who have died in this past year since our last commemoration of All Saints and All Souls. Some of us have lots of people on the list of names we will read at the altar. And don't be surprised if the presider's voice breaks in the midst of reading the list.

In both these commemorations of famous saints and more personal ones we celebrate the fuller fellowship of what we affirm as the communion of saints. And, at a minimum, in the Apostle's Creed and our baptismal covenant we say we believe in the communion of saints. And who is that exactly?

One way to think of these saints, both official and unofficial, who are part of this communion of saints is as those who have preceded us in death, our forebears, our ancestors in life and faith, and to remember that they are nearby and waiting to be asked for help. And I don't know about you, but I need a lot of it.

Like Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, they have marked the course before us. They have passed on, not away, on, not away. For in death their lives have been changed, not ended; 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": the folks in the celestial stands rooting for us and cheering us on and feeling it when we stumble, hoping that we'll get back up and try again. Those of us who are still on our earthly pilgrimage are surrounded by this fellowship of love and prayer. This great company are active encouragers. They are on our side.

They are "the company of heaven." In nearly every eucharistic prayer we hear about them. And we say, *And so, with angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven* we join our voices with those who forever sing the hymn, *Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might*. In a very real sense, we are all gathered together at the altar each and every time the Eucharist is celebrated any place, any time.

They are the communion of saints, and we are, also, part of the communion of saints. For all the baptized are the communion of saints. The church triumphant, those who have passed on but not away. The church militant; maybe a better rendition at this stage of human history would be the church active, alive, and aware. And, there are members upon members of the communion of saints who have not yet been born. But after they have been, and after they have been baptized into Christ's one holy catholic and apostolic church, they, too, will be members of this communion of saints.

In the history of Christian art, various artists have attempted to depict this presence, this reality, this joy, this hope that every time we celebrate the Eucharist the whole communion of saints are gathered 'round together. If you wonder what happens after this life, it seems like we're gonna be pretty busy showing up at Eucharists all the time.

One of the artists who has tried to depict this is an Englishman named Thomas Noyes-Lewis. There are two famous paintings of his, prints of which hang in our sacristy here at St Paul's, which try to let us imagine what it means when we say we join with all the company of heaven. If you have a bulletin here in person or livestreaming wherever you are, look at the back page, the last page. There is one of

those images by Thomas Noyes-Lewis. Do you see them gathered at the altar? Not just the presider, not just the eucharistic minister, not just the people bodily assembled, but all the company of heaven, the entire communion of saints gathered at the altar.

Thomas Noyes-Lewis died in 1946. A lot of his work was during the era of the Great War, the first world war. Look on page 11 of your bulletin. There's another of his famous artworks attempting to imagine this reality and help us to connect with that reality. Can you see who's gathered at the altar in that one? Not just Abraham and Sarah and all their descendants, but also the baptized who are the dead of all the wars of all the world. All the saints in light gathered with all the saints still making their earthly pilgrimage. I don't know about you, but it's good news to know there is, we are the communion of saints.

Especially on this day, we remember that we are accompanied by them. And as we remember them and pray for them, we pray as the prayer book says that they "may go from strength to strength in a new life of perfect service." We can rest in the knowledge that they pray for us and pray with us and intercede for us even as we remember them and pray for them and ask them to intercede for us.

We are connected to them and to one another and to all those yet unborn in this lifegiving, wisdom-bearing reality: our bonds to one another in Christ, bonds that cannot be ended—not even in death, not even by death.

This is one of the reasons why—this reality that we are also part of the communion of saints—that on this Sunday, All Saints Sunday, is one of four times during the year when we reaffirm our baptismal vows, even if no one is to be baptized in our particular place. It's to remember this covenant that we share with the living and the living again.

And so, in a few moments, we will renew our baptismal promises, and we'll be sprinkled with holy water as a reminder of our baptism. This day in particular, we will remember that as we continue to live this life, our life, in God's world we do so "surrounded by the witness of all the saints to God's power and mercy." All of us who have been baptized are forever part of the communion of saints, this mystical bond.

And so, every day, but especially this day, we say, thanks be to God for all the saints.