

I

One of privileges of my calling as a pastor is that I get invited to be with families on some of the most significant days of their lives. I get invited to rejoice with families and pray with them when a new baby has arrived. I get invited to stand with couples as they make their solemn vows to one another, as two families come together and new one is formed in the covenant of marriage. And I get invited to stand with families at the graveside, as they gather together to grieve and to commend their loved one into the everlasting arms of God.

Whenever I am invited to a graveside service, I do my very best to arrive in the cemetery well in advance of the appointed hour of the service, and so I often have at least 10 or 15 minutes of quiet solitude in the cemetery while I wait for the family and friends of the deceased to arrive. And when I have those quiet moments in a cemetery, I often find myself contemplating the nearby headstones and grave markers.

I find myself wondering about the lives those headstones represent. Some of those lives were very long in years, and some were very short. But every headstone bears a name. Every headstone represents a life on this earth that has come to an end.

II

And that's one of the things about us as humans that makes us unique from all the other creatures with whom we share this planet. We live with the

conscious knowledge that our lives, and the lives of everyone we know and love, will one day end. Our family dog Yogi does not have that knowledge. He's capable of showing emotion – of love and joy and anger and fear. But he doesn't lie in the sunny spot on the kitchen floor and contemplate the reality of his eventual death like we humans do.

To be human is to come to terms with the knowledge that from the moment we take our first breath, we are drawing closer to the day we exhale our last, as is everyone we know and love.

The scandal of the gospel is that the line between the living and the dead is not nearly as sharp as first meets the eye. The scandal of the gospel is that our end is actually just the beginning. The scandal of the gospel is that death, and the mourning and crying and pain that death brings with it, will one day be no more. And that leads us to our reading this morning from the Book of Revelation.

III

This Fall, we've been reading and preaching our way through some of the major stories of the Hebrew Scriptures, also sometimes referred to as the Old Testament. But we're taking a detour this morning and fast forwarding all the way to the last book of the bible, to a book called Revelation.

The Book of Revelation is a different kind of literature than almost every other book in Scripture. It's not a narrative, and the action does not move in a linear fashion. It's more like the

retelling of a vivid dream – full of fantastic images and symbols and poetry. The word Revelation is closely related to the word reveal, as in, to make something known that had previously been hidden. And that’s what the Book of Revelation is – a dream-like revealing, a glimpse, a peek.

As best as scholars can ascertain, the Book of Revelation was written by a man named John sometime in the late first century, or perhaps even as late as the second century. John was a devoted disciple of Jesus and therefore something of a thorn in the side of the Roman Empire, so the empire had marooned him on the island of Patmos, essentially a big rock in the Aegean Sea. In the opening verses of the book, John tells his readers that one Lord’s day, he was in the spirit, that is, in prayer, and he heard a voice tell him to write down what he was about to see.

And contrary to what Hollywood might have us believe, the focus of what is being revealed is not fire and brimstone and the four horsemen of the apocalypse all that other spooky stuff. That’s there, sure, and it gets our attention and draws lots of speculation, but that’s not the focus of the book. The focus is spelled out for us in the first five words of the book – Quoting directly now from Revelation 1:1 – The revelation of Jesus Christ. Revelation is yet another glimpse of Jesus of Nazareth, the one who Christians call the Messiah, the Christ, the one in whom Christians claim all of human history and all of human destiny comes together.

And so listen now for a Word from God as we read more of John’s revelation, beginning now at chapter 21 and reading verses 1-6.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

“See, the home of God is among mortals.

He will dwell with them;

they will be his peoples,

and God himself will be with them;

he will wipe every tear from their eyes.

Death will be no more;

mourning and crying and pain will be no more,

for the first things have passed away.”

And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.” Then he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

IV

To be human is to live with the knowledge that someday, you and everyone you have ever known and loved

will die. But this morning's text gives us a glimpse, a peek, of how things will one day be.

Death will be no more. Mourning and crying and pain will be no more.

Those aren't John's words. They're Jesus' words. That's the loud voice John heard. That's the one who John saw seated on the throne.

The one who was crucified. The one who died. The one who defeated the power of death and was raised again. The one who is making all things new. The one whose words are trustworthy and true.

V

For centuries, Christians around the world have marked either November 1 or the first Sunday of November as All Saints Day - a day in the life of the church in which we give thanks for the saints - those who have gone before us, who have, as the Scripture puts it, who have finished the race of faith and who now rest from their labors, those who make up our great cloud of witnesses.

For us, the saints that we honor and remember are those who have shown us in both word and deed what it looks like to live as a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ. So on All Saints Day, we remember and honor saints that lived a long time ago in faraway places - saints like John, and Peter, and Paul, and Mary and Martha, and Lydia.

But we also celebrate and remember the saints who lived not so very

long ago among us right here in Athens. It is a tradition in many churches, including ours, to read aloud the names of the members of the church who have died and joined the Church Triumphant since the previous year's All Saints observance. And so this morning, in a few we are going to read aloud the names saints of this congregation who this year have finished their race, who rest from their labors, who have entered into the joy that their Master has prepared for them, hearing those wonderful words, "Well done, my good and faithful servant."

Almost every week in our worship service, we recite together the Apostles' Creed. And in the Creed is a little phrase near the end that says, "I believe in the communion of the saints." Sometimes, I think we sort of gloss over that line without really thinking about what it means, but perhaps today is a good day to unpack it a little more.

The communion of the saints.

For those of us who practice our Christian faith in the Presbyterian Reformed tradition, we believe that when the church gathers around this Table, it's not just a symbol, not just a sentimental remembrance.

We believe that when the bread is broken and the cup is poured, somehow, in ways we don't fully understand, the Holy Spirit lifts us up in the presence of Jesus. But not only Jesus - but also in the communion of the saints.

When we come to this Table, we believe that there are always more of the

people of God gathered together than those present in the room. When we come to this Table, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we come to it in the communion of saints like Abraham and Sarah and Moses and Zipporah and David and Solomon.

When we come to this Table, we come to it in the communion of the saints, like Frank Sherrill. And Jill Crim. And Skeets Baldwin and Dot Handley. And the list goes on.

When we come to this Table, we come to it in the communion of the saints, not just saints who were members of this church, but with all those women and men who have modeled for us with their very lives what it looks like to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love your neighbor as you love yourself.

When we come to this Table, we testify that we are people of resurrection hope, and that the line between the living and the dead is not nearly as sharp as the fallen powers of this world would have us believe.

On this first Sunday of November, as the leaves are falling and winter waits in the wings, we testify that first, last, and always, we are Easter people, and because of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, death has lost all its power over us.

Yes, one day they will call your name. And one day, they will call my name. One day, the name of every single person you have ever loved will be called.

But when our name is called, we will take our place at the great heavenly banquet, along with a great multitude that no one can count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, and we will stand before the throne and before the Lamb, and we will worship and give glory to God forever.

When our name is called to take our place among the saints, we, too, will hunger no more. When our name is called to take our place among the saints, we, too, will thirst no more. When our name is called to take our place among the saints, we too, will never be scorched by the sun by day nor shiver under the chill of the nighttime sky.

We've read the last page of the book. We know how the story of God and God's people ends.

In the end, God wins.

In the end, God dwells with God's people, not just two in a garden, but in the holy city, as beautiful as a bride on her wedding day.

In the end, death and mourning and crying and pain will be no more.

In the end, when our name is called to take our place among the saints, we will know what it is to have the tears wiped away from our eyes by the very hand of God.

Thanks be to God for the communion of the saints! Amen.