

Sermon: Year B All Saints Day – November 4, 2018

Margaret Mitchell

Readings: Wisdom of Solomon 3:1-9

Psalm 24

Revelation 21:1-6A

John 11:32-44

Prayer: Lord take my lips and speak through them, take our minds and think through them, take our hearts and set them on fire with love for yourself. Amen.

Where do you come from? Where do you go after you die? Do you believe in the afterlife? Or do you believe there is nothing after death... that we are simply absorbed into the organic matter of the cosmos? Difficult questions. Ones we probably don't ponder much in our early years, but spend more time reflecting on as we enter our senior years.

For me this week, it has been one of deep reflection on the life and death question as we have celebrated All Hallows Eve, or Hallowe'en as it's generally known, All Saints Day and All Souls Day, which in some cultures is known as the Day of the Dead.

Wikipedia tells us that Hallowe'en begins the three-day observance of Allhallowtide, the time in the liturgical year dedicated to remembering the dead, including saints (hallows), martyrs, and all the faithful departed. And today, being the closest Sunday to November 1st and 2nd we are celebrating All Saints and All Souls Days.

With our readings, hymns, prayers and liturgy we pay homage to all who have gone before us and for the life to come. These are not days celebrated widely in society... All Hallows Eve, or Hallowe'en takes centre stage this time of year sandwiched between Thanksgiving and Advent.

So why do we celebrate All Saints Day and All Souls Day? What is its deeper meaning for us as people of faith?

On All Saints Day we remember the acts of Christian martyrs, as well as the deeds and works of "canonized" saints. On All Souls Day we celebrate the lives of **all** the faithful, living and dead, for whom the kingdom of God is their ultimate destiny.

We remember those who have preceded us in the life of faith. We recall their noble lives as examples of courage and faithfulness, and we celebrate the heavenly hope to which they aspired. In doing so, we find ourselves linked with them as sharers of a common hope and destiny. So back to my questions then... where do we come from, and where will we go after death?

It is relatively easy in this day and age to figure out where we came from. There are numerous internet sites providing us with the opportunity to research and discover our ancestry, genealogy, family trees and family history... I know that some of you here this morning are intrigued by researching your lineage and there's a sense of pride in being able to trace our ancestors back a few hundred years. Members of my husband Jim's family have traced their lineage back to the 17th century and have quite the tale to tell about how they are related to Captain Blood who died in 1680.

Colonel Thomas Blood (1618 – 24 August 1680) was an Anglo-Irish officer and self-styled colonel best known for his attempt to steal the Crown Jewels of England from the Tower of London in 1671. Described in an American source as a "noted bravo and desperado," he was known for his attempt to kidnap and, later, to kill, his enemy, the Duke of Ormonde. He had switched allegiances from Royalist to Roundhead during during the Wars of the Three Kingdoms, and despite his subsequent notoriety received a Royal free pardon and found favour at the court of King Charles II.

In a book I am currently reading I quote from a place in the story where the two main characters, Scarlett and Cole are lying on the grass in a football field looking up at the night sky. Scarlett is an orphan, 14 years old, and has been severely physically and emotionally abused all her life; she doesn't see any point in going on living. Cole tries to persuade her to hang on until she's 18 and can take charge of her own life.

“Why should I go on living?” asks Scarlett...’

Cole responds: “There's your reason!” I say, pointing a finger into the endless expanse of darkened sky. How can you look at all those billions of stars and not feel humbled? Every problem we face is so small and insignificant that it's foolish to let it weigh us down. We are free, and we are perfect. We are part of something greater than ourselves, and something great is in each of us. We're connected. It's easy to forget that when you're mired in all the crap people have done to you. But you're so much more than your past, and your pain. You need to rise above it all. You're part of this Scarlett. You're part of eternity. That's the truth.

Isn't it crazy when you really think about it? It's easy to forget when you have your nose stuck in a book or a computer all day, but we are organic, spiritual beings. You're not an orphan, because there is no such thing as an orphan. Two people don't create a life. Your parents were just a vehicle for your existence. They were part of a long line of ancestry – thousands of human beings who met by random coincidence, and had children for any number of strange reasons, or by pure accident – all culminating in the person that is *you*. You're a child of nature. We all are. And it's just amazing and mind blowing, everything that has led to us standing right here, right now.

We're made up of stuff that's billions of years old. Stuff that's grown and changed and been ripped apart and put back together in millions of different ways. What's a year more? four years more? It's all nothing. It's an infinitesimal speck of time for your soul.

Right here, right now? This is precious. This is life. You're alive. Somehow, all of the genetic material of all those thousands of ancestors came together in the perfect combination to make you, exactly as you are. That's magical, it's the greatest kind of magic I know. Our very existence.

I know you're suffering. That's what life means. It means suffering to survive. And we have to keep doing it, because it'll all be over in the blink of an eye, anyway. Even if you live eighty more years, or ninety more years. It's nothing at all. It's just this tiny bit of life you get to experience before we return to dust, so why waste it? Suffer with me and experience life with me, while we're lucky enough to be here, together. We might never get another chance.”

What an awesome picture that paints for us... each of us is part of a long line of ancestry – thousands of human beings who met by random coincidence, and had children for any number of strange reasons, or by pure accident – down through the ages, the millennia of time... all culminating in the person that is *you, the person that is me*.

And so on All Souls Day, we remember our ancestors, who brought us into the life of the world, and we give thanks to God for being with us from the beginning of time.

Our First Nations brothers and sisters have a strong, unshakeable faith in this truth. And we can learn a lot from them; they acknowledge their

ancestors as a living and integral part of their lives. Here in the Territory of the People, in all our churches we always acknowledge the traditional territories on which we gather, and invite our First Nations people to be an integral part of our celebrations and ministry.

Recently I attended the Induction of the Reverend Angus Muir to the communities of Lytton and Scw'exm, where he has been called as priest to minister to mainly First Nations people. We gathered at the church in Shulus, Merritt where the proceedings began with drumming. The door of the church was opened and the ancestors were invited in to be with us in this celebration of the beginning of Angus' ministry. After the service, prayers of thanks were given to the ancestors for their presence, the drums were sung, the ancestors invited to leave, and the door closed behind them. It was a powerful and emotional moment.

For us non First Nations people we haven't learned this cultural practice, but we do have this one day a year which we dedicate to remembering our ancestors.

Watching a program on TV this week I was reminded of the Day of the Dead which is celebrated in Mexico. There, Marigold flowers are displayed in abundance as it is believed the Marigolds help guide their ancestors spirits back to them. They believe the veil between our world and the spirit world is very thin, and the marigolds, photos and mementos of dead loved ones help guide them back to the living.

We all have ancestors, and if we believe their spirits surround us, it leads us to the question... where do you believe we go after death?

Our readings today provide us with a glimpse of the promise of eternal life... and I quote from "Preaching through the Christian Year"

"The Wisdom of Solomon captures the spirit of celebration of All Saints, assuring us that the souls of the righteous are in the hands of God. Immortal life is in the hands of God. Like life itself it is a gift of God. It is connected with the life of faith, love, grace and mercy. And because eternal life is a gift of God, the words from the Wisdom of Solomon can sound out as a hymn of praise and thanksgiving to God for all the Saints.

Psalm 24 responds by offering assurance that the faithful will ascend the hill of the Lord and have a place in God's presence.

From Revelation we see the vision of a new heaven and a new earth, a vision which has captured the imagination of saints in every century; they have been drawn to it and motivated by it, even as we are.

And in recounting the story of the raising of Lazarus, the Gospel reading from John brings to the forefront the themes of resurrection and eternal life.”

The celebration of All Saints, All Souls Day reminds us that God is a God of the living and not of the dead. The Gospel proclaims Jesus as the resurrection and the life, and this chapter of John says this most dramatically.

The act of raising Lazarus set in motion the political machinery for Jesus’ own death, Lazarus being released from the tomb would mean Jesus had to enter it.

How similar are the components of Lazarus in the tomb as to the account of Jesus’ death. A tomb near Jerusalem; the tomb a cave covered in a large stone; the stone rolled away; Jesus troubled; Jesus cried out; the grave cloth. The description of Jesus disturbed in spirit and deeply moved, weeping, all evidence of Jesus own death and resurrection.

Jesus is the point where death ends and life begins; he provides life on both sides of the grave, here and the hereafter. In this story, Jesus enlarges our hope by moving eternal life from a time at the end of our life to the here and now, our time of faith in Christ, asking Martha and us... “Do you believe this?”

Jesus will give life not to Lazarus alone, but to all who believe...“I am the resurrection and the life” Jesus says, “Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live; and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.”

In Bible study this week, Ken asked us the questions: “where do you believe we go after you die?” and “who gets in, who stays out?” One person responded: we are energy; you can’t destroy energy, we remain as energy after our physical body has gone and we add to the universal energy all around us.”

My own comment was this: we are all created in God's image and everything God created is good, so how can God reject from God's presence what God created; how can some be accepted into the kingdom and others rejected?

Another commented that death is a tunnel of darkness, and we head towards the light... non believers, and those who have committed wickedness and evil, remain in the darkness, but surrounded by love and healing until such time as they too can go into the light.

In the Eucharistic Prayer three which Ken will be using in the liturgy today we will hear words about our ancestry ...

"We give thanks to you, Lord our God, for the goodness and love you have made known to us in creation; in calling Israel to be your people; in your Word spoken through the prophets; and above all in the Word made flesh, Jesus your son"....

We will hear words about our life after death..

"In him you have brought us out of error into truth, out of sin into righteousness, out of death into life.... In the fullness of time reconcile all things in Christ, and make them new, and bring us to that city of light where you dwell with all your sons and daughters, through Jesus Christ our Lord the firstborn of all creation, the head of the church and the author of our salvation."

Around God's throne all the saints - our brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers, grandparents and great grandparents, sing God's praises for ever. Their glory fills us with joy, and their communion with us in the church gives us inspiration and strength as we journey on our pilgrimage of faith, resting in the assurance we will once again, meet them face to face.

All Souls Day is for us, a time for remembering the people we love, who were important to us, who made an impact on our lives and then died and left us behind.

On All Saints, All Souls Day, in God's Holy Church, the losses we have borne over the years come front and centre and are named for all to hear, on holy ground. On this day, we gather in this sanctuary and let our grief for those whom we have lost, bind us together in a new and powerful way.

Every time we name our loved ones among the saints, we honour not only their lives but our own long battle with memories both painful and joyful.

As *The Rev. Whitney Rice* says in her blog post...

“Jesus brought his friend back, just as on the final day we will all be brought back to life by him to live with him and in him. And how did Jesus raise Lazarus up to new life? How did he bring him back from the dead? By calling his name. “Lazarus, come out!” Today, we’re doing the same thing. We’re calling out the names of the ones we loved who have passed on, and they answer. They are resurrected in our hearts, brought to life in this time and place. Whether on one side of the border between life and death or the other, we all want to be with our loved ones. As the communion of saints joins spirits across the divide today, we may realize that we are being called by name today as well, named and loved by the ones who have gone before us.”

I invite each of you to name out loud those whom you resurrect in your heart, at this time, and in this place. And during communion, the prayer station at the back of the church is available to each of you to come and sit, and be surrounded in prayer by our prayer ministry team.

We are not alone... we are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses.

Let us speak out now for all to hear the names of our loved ones who have gone before us.

Silence... (3 or 4 minutes)

Lord Jesus,

We thank you for your love shown in the lives of all your saints: those who lived in the past and those living now; those whose names are well known, and those whose names are known only to you. Amen.