*FOR ALL SAINTS*

John 11:32-44

Rev. 21:1-7

October 31, 2021

Normally we would name this Sunday on our bulletin and celebrate it as Reformation Day. Our Presbyterian Program Calendar tells us that it is. Reformation Day remembers Martin Luther’s nailing up his 95 theses of argument against, and reformation of, the Roman Catholic Church. Have you ever wondered why Martin Luther chose to post his 95 theses on October 31st? It was not by calendar accident that Luther posted them on the door of Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany on this day in 1517.

He knew that the next day, November 1st, All Saints Day would be one of the most attended days of the worship year. November 1st had become a day of “holy obligation” by Papal decree in 1484. The Papal Decree told people that when they entered the church for worship on All Saints Day a soul would be released from purgatory. Attendance soared. Even this holy practice became corrupted. (Of course. Why not?) Eventually people would walk in the door, walk out again, then in again, then out, then in . . . each time believing they would release a soul from purgatory.

The celebration for All Saints Day is not new. The early Christian believers, as far back as the 3rd and 4th Century, set aside one day a year to remember and honor all Christian martyrs.

In the 2nd century, Polycarp, the Bishop of the church at Smyrna, was burned at the stake because he refused to call Caesar “God.” Before the fire was lit, his captors said, “Come now, bishop, where is the harm in just saying ‘Caesar is Lord’ and offering incense, when it will save your life?”

Polycarp replied, “Eighty-six years have I served Him, and He has done me no wrong. How can I then blaspheme my King and my Savior?”

Through the centuries countless others have made the same confession. The Apostle Paul was put to death by Nero. One of Martin Luther’s fellow monks was captured in the Netherlands and burned at the stake. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was imprisoned and hanged in the Flossenberg concentration camp in 1945. Rachel Scott, a devout Christian teen, active in her youth group at Orchard Rd. Christian Church, was the first student killed in the Columbine High School Massacre of April 20, 1999.

These and all who have been martyred because of their faith in Jesus now rest under the altar of God in Heaven until Jesus returns. John writes in Rev. 6, “I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the Word of God.” “They were given a white robe and told to rest a little longer until the number of their brethren should be complete.”

Saints, of course, is the term by which the New Testament refers to Christians. If you believe,you are a saint, according to scripture. There’s no especially high achievement needed for saints, as we think of it in the Roman Catholic Church, with their saints. If you believe, according to scripture, you and I are saints. So All Saints Day has come to include all the souls who have believed in Jesus Christ, no longer just martyrs.

And this is why, on All Saints Day, the church stops to remember the cloud of witnesses, family members, brothers and sisters in the faith, who have died holding to the secure promises of forgiveness and salvation, guaranteed by the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Rich or poor. Famous or forgotten. Respected or reviled, your life’s situation makes no difference. Death is not a respecter of persons; it will come for everyone you love. It will not select according to logic, or love, or fairness. All that can be said with certainty is that death is going to come to every person.

This is reality, but too many of us live our days as if we have some special one-of-a-kind immunity from the word “terminal.” Some, like William Saroyan, a well-known writer of plays and short stories, thought he had a one-of-a-kind immunity from the reality of death. From his deathbed he contacted the Associated Press and said, “We all know that everybody had got to die, but I have always believed an exception would be made in my case.”

In spite of an overwhelming amount of evidence to the contrary, many people seem to think death will come for billions of strangers, but leave them untouched. Let me lay it on the line. Every human being has sinned, and the penalty for sin is death (Rom. 3:26). Because you and I have broken God’s commandments, you will not be untouched. Nor will I.

However. However(!) The cemetery is not he dominion of the Grim Reaper, but the domain of the Soul Keeper, Jesus Christ. The prophet Isaiah proclaimed, “O dwellers in the dust, awake and sing for joy!” Jesus came to Bethlehem to implement the prophet’s words: “O dwellers in the dust, awake and sing for joy!” Jesus said, “Trust in God; trust also in me. There is more than enough room in my Father’s house, and I have fashioned a special place just for you and me so that you may be with me there.” “The one who believes I me will live.” This is the promise of Jesus.

The Gospel of Matthew tells of a confrontation Jesus had with the Sadducees over a question about resurrection. They knew about Lazarus, who was raised after being in the grave four days, and now stank.

But traditional Judaism was divided on the topic of the resurrection. The Sadducees were an aristocratic group made up of the families from which the chief priests were chosen. They rejected the oral traditions of the Pharisees and they rejected belief in the resurrection. The Pharisees believed in a “spiritual resurrection” and in angels. The Sadducees believed in neither.

So the Sadducees pose the question of seven brothers who had the same wife. Again, it was tradition that if a man dies, his wife would become the wife of his brother. They want to know whose wife this woman will be in heaven after she has been widowed seven times. It’s a trick question. The Sadducees don’t believe in the resurrection. That’s why they are so ‘sad, u see.’ They want to embarrass Jesus.

Jesus gives an answer that confronts the belief of both the Sadducees and the Pharisees. Jesus confronts these religious leaders with the words of Isaiah: “Your dead will live, their bodies will rise, you who dwell in the dust, wake up and shout for joy.” “For I am the resurrection and the life,” Jesus said (Jn. 11:25).

Jesus told the Sadducees, “I am here to tell you the words of the prophet are true.” What is the guarantee that the words of Jesus are true? The answer rests in the Jerusalem graveyard. The tomb of Jesus was found empty, except for the deflated linen shroud left behind. He rose from death and left the grave empty.

The Apostle Paul writes to the Corinthian Christians, who lived in a culture that laughed at the possibility of a resurrected physical body: “Jesus was raised from death on the third day . . . he presented himself alive to Peter and to more than 500 followers, to James, and finally to me” (I Cor. 15:4-8). Here is Paul’s challenge: Line up the witnesses. Call them out one by one.

Do you see Paul’s logic? If one person claimed a post-cross encounter with Jesus, people could disregard it. If a dozen people offered depositions, chalk it up to mob hysteria. But fifty? A hundred? Five hundred? They saw him physically. They touched him. They did not see a phantom. And the Gospel of Luke makes sure to tell us that the resurrected Jesus ate a piece of fish with them. What ghost does that?

Because we human beings have rebelled against God and God’s perfection; because, therefore, you and I and everyone we know have sinned, the day will come when you and I will say an earthly farewell to a friend or family member. On that day as you walk away from the gravesite, you will leave behind a part of yourself and your life will never be the same.

But this sadness has a solution. Once, long ago, Jesus said, “mourners can be comforted.” No, that’s not quite right. He said it far more forcefully than that. Jesus removed all doubt and declared, “mourners will be comforted.”

Christianity and Christianity alone claims, “The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.” Christianity is the only faith that can state, “by God’s grace and mercy we are forgiven our broken commandments and given the gift of eternal life.”

In contrast to every other religion, every other faith, Christianity alone can offer forgiveness and eternal life. Jesus died the death our sins deserved. He paid the punishment price of our disobedience. Jesus took our place, yours and mine. Jesus offered His perfect, sinless life on the cross in our place, so that our Creator could transfer all Christ’s righteousness to all who acknowledge Jesus God’s son and our Saviour. Yeah. I don’t know how either. but that was God’s plan and God’s doing.

In contrast to every other faith, every other religion, Christianity is alone in promising a resurrected, glorified body, because Jesus rose, physically, from the grave.

It was revealed to John,

“ I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven.

“And I heard a loud voice out of heaven saying, ‘Behold, the dwelling of God is with human beings, and He Himself shall dwell with them, and they shall be His people.’”

and so

“Behold, a host, arrayed in white; like a thousand snow clad mountains bright. With palms they stand . . . before the throne of light. They sing their songs in endless light. O blessed saints in bright array now safely home in the endless day . . . God’s word sustained them on their way.”

Amen, and Amen.