

“Laundry with the Lamb”

November 1, 2020

One Good Thing series – All Saints Sunday – Livestream

The story is told of a cross country race in Spain. Kenyan runner Abel Mutai was just a few feet from the finish line, but he became confused with the signage and stopped, thinking he had completed the race. A Spanish runner, Ivan Fernandez, was right behind him and, realizing what was happening, started shouting at the Kenyan to continue running. Mutai didn't know Spanish and didn't understand what Fernandez was saying. Realizing what was happening, Fernandez pushed Mutai to victory.

After the race, a journalist asked Fernandez, "Why did you do that?"

Fernandez replied, "My dream is that someday we can have a kind of community life where we push and help each other to win."

The journalist insisted, "But why did you let the Kenyan win?"

Fernandez replied, "I didn't let him win, he was going to win. The race was his."

The journalist insisted, and again said, "But you could have won!" Fernandez looked at him and replied, "But what would be the merit of my victory? What would be the honor in that medal? What would my mother think of that?"

That story made me think about the good stories that sometimes get lost among all the rest of the negative news. Fernandez's mention of his mother made me think about our celebration of All Saints Day. We name and remember those who have shared the journey of faith with us and shaped our lives. They shared their faith in Christ with us; their witness has had a lasting impact on our own. And they remind us that today isn't just about their faith, but ours, too.

It's always powerful for me to consider the legacy of faith. This year, my dad, my great aunt, and two other close loved ones are among those whose now light shines eternally in God's perfect peace – no longer in this earthly space – yet still shining brightly through the love they showed me and their relationship with God who loved them.

It's a mix of pain from grief at real loss in my life, but I also find comfort, especially in these verses from Revelation. There's comfort in the vision that John offers – these saints who worship God in heaven. The images of this great crowd in white robes, waving branches, are an assurance of victory in Jesus and security in God's presence. For John's audience, this vision of heaven was intended to bring encouragement to those who were living on earth. It does for me, and I hope can do the same for all of us.

The Book of Revelation was written during the reign of the Roman Emperor, Domitian, who was in power from 81-96 AD. During his reign, Christians were persecuted. There were internal divisions in the early church mainly over false

teachings. One Christian leader, whom we know as John the Seer (not to be confused with the Gospel writer), was sent to the island of Patmos as punishment. While he was there, he saw visions and communicated his visions with symbols as a way to ensure that other Christians could receive them.

If you read through Revelation, it's full of strange and confusing images. Our Tuesday morning Bible study has been reading through, and it is a wild ride! Different traditions have different ideas about what the symbols mean and how these visions play out in the end. But this vision of the multitude worshipping at God's throne is powerful - people from every nation and tribe, speaking different languages.

John's vision shows the people surrounding the throne and falling at the feet of Jesus – the Lamb who was slain and is worthy. They have found their true unity and hope in worshipping Jesus. They are in God's presence because of Jesus' sacrifice. Jesus redeems them. That's his work in us, too, but we do have a part to play – to live our faith.

John offered his fellow followers of Jesus comfort in the midst of what they were experiencing and hope for what God was doing. One writer says that John wrote to others to control their fear, renew their commitment, and sustain their vision in a time when all anyone could see was cruelty, death, and hopelessness. And even these saints have been through struggle.

There are different opinions about the struggle that this great crowd has been through. Is it a specific event like the end times? Is it simply the struggle of enduring uncertain times? Is it a global event or the everyday stuff of life that we read about: illness, abuse, hunger, poverty, and all the rest? Depending on the scholar you ask, you'll get a different answer.

Suffice it to say that they've been through a struggle, but the key is that they washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb. Obviously, it's an interesting image – you can't make a robe white in blood!

Perhaps it's a reference to the blood as life – as sacrifice. These are the ones who have taken on the life of the Lamb, who is Jesus. Sometimes we hear that reference in New Testament letters to “putting on Christ” or “clothing ourselves with Christ.” It's living our lives for Christ – following him – showing his sacrificial love to others.

John's visions from God offered hope, and hope is a long-term motivator. But hope isn't easy, and it's tough to talk about hope when we're struggling with loss and uncertainty because of the state of the world. There's illness, unrest, injustice, and divisiveness. Fear and hatred seem to permeate so much right now. We don't know what will happen this week. I continue to pray for a free, fair, safe, and peaceful election.

Our hope in God is a blessing, but it feels trite to say that God offers us a vision for life with Jesus and end there. That's true, and we claim this vision for those we

remember today, but that's not where this day ends. There's more to hear than just a vision for those we love. There's a challenge for those who were loved.

In these months nearing the election, how many of you have received flyers and phone calls asking you to vote for a particular candidate? We've seen our share of celebrities and notable names endorsing a particular candidate. Every political campaign has its share of celebrity endorsements, and many times, those endorsements make a difference – or at least that's the hope.

All Saints Day presents us with a challenge. Today is a Memorial Day for Christians, but that's not the end of it. We celebrate the saints who showed us and taught us about faith in Jesus, and their witness challenges us to consider our own witness: do others know we are Christians because of the way we speak and act? Do they know we are Christians by our love? Do our lives show our connection to and endorsement of Jesus as Lord and Savior of our lives? Is it clear those around us?

I thought about that for my loved ones – and for those who were a part of our congregation. I'm grateful for the ways they pointed to Christ as a source of help and strength, for their service, for their constant prayers, for the joy of the Lord in them, for their perseverance in struggle, for their hope.

But hope is more than optimism. Hope runs deep and is grounded in believing that God is Creator of the world, that God is good, and that God is at work in us and around us to bring good. God invites us to share in working for good – even when the situation seems utterly hopeless.

And hope in God doesn't always make sense. Perhaps those Christians who struggled when John sent this vision were ready to give up. Some call it outrageous to trust God when life is at its worst, but that's what I know is true about the saints. They claimed hope – doing the hard work of loving, living faithfully each day, sacrificing for others, praying fervently and paying attention to God's still, small voice, believing God's promises.

So, we're grateful for the ones we remember today who have washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb and now gather around the throne of God in worship. But as one commentator says, "it is our time in the laundry room. We wash our robes in the blood, in the life and witness and example of the Lamb, and then we put that witness on and begin to look like him and act like him. And love like him. And comfort like him." We're called to be more like Jesus every day.

We miss people today. I miss my dad and those loved ones who now rest with God. But I hear the call to hope – and to action. It's confirmed when we come to this table. Jesus is the host who calls us to take and eat in remembrance of him. And when we remember him, we recount his life and ministry and death and resurrection. When we remember him, we hear his command to us – to love one another. We confirm our hope in God alone – not in anyone else, not in anything else.

We give thanks for those who have lived faithfully and shared the Good News of Jesus with us – and then we keep sharing it! We join with the saints in glory here who now worship in God's full presence with renewed strength, unending joy, and perfect peace. And we anticipate that same glory as we live the way of Jesus.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

And as we prepare to come to the table, we offer our prayers...