All Saints' Day 2026
Sermon 11.1.26

Revelation 7:9-17
After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying, "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!" And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, singing, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen." Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?" I said to him, "Sir, you are the one that knows." Then he said to me, "These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

Matthew 5:1-12
When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (448)

There's an article of faith among congregations like this one that all we need as a congregation for sustaining into the future is an arrival of "young families." To grow and sustain, to last into the next generation and more, all we need to come and join is some "young families." This is an article of faith in that it's unproven yet also immovable as far as

things you'll hear said in congregational meetings. Why, it came up in a meeting I attended just last Tuesday. A struggling congregation was awaiting that mysterious and salvific advent: the arrival of young families.

They are not forthcoming.

They are also not salvific.

To be clear I am not against young families arriving in church–and if this were the Sunday they were to arrive, I'd be improvising up here, scuttling the original preaching plan. To be clear, I aim always to be ready if and when they do. But the reality is young families place demands on a congregation, in need of services that must be developed and managed. It would be a good challenge to have, but it would be a challenge.

And it's no guarantee that it will make the congregation more sustainable.

When I was the mother of one such young family, and my congregation had no capacity, nor even apparent interest, in providing what my young family needed, Jesse took the kids elsewhere, to Trinity church, with its Godly Play program that had at that point merged with Church on the Hill. Having connected with the priest serving there then, I heard him tell of one other such "young family." The mother of that family had stated very plainly what she was there for: the moral guidance of her children. She didn't believe in any of the tenants of the Christian faith, and wasn't interested in her own faith formation. She just thought her kids would become more ethical adults if they had some religious teachings. She was here for that.

And as soon as her two children had aged out of Godly Play, she was gone–she and her not-so-young-anymore family, who were now perhaps more in the position to contribute than to consume. But that was not to be

The priest summed the whole ten years up: "Thanks." His flat-line response: "Thanks for that."

My point isn't that I'm happy not to have "young families" here at Church on the Hill. My point is that this article of faith, that "young families" will save us, is false–and misleading.

The church is as much a house of remembering as a house of hope.

Today, as you know by now, is All Saints' Day. This is the 2nd day of a triduum, which is any three-day festival of the church year. Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and Easter make

up the most sacred triduum, but this one has its place too, Oct. 31st as All Hallow's Eve, November 1st as All Saints' Day, and November 2nd as All Souls' Day.

It has its place, but that place has not included the liturgical year of the Protestant Reformation. This, indeed, was one church festival jettisoned, likely for its being extra-biblical. The Reformers, for their emphasis on *sola scriptura*, their notion that the Christian faith should be founded only on what you find in the Bible, had little interest in anything that might show up from beyond that. And there's no mention in the Bible of Halloween, All Saints' Day, All Souls' Day, and certainly not the triduum of these together.

For what it's worth, I think the reformers' zeal around this stripping away of many such church festivals leaves us Protestants a bit impoverished. I think there's something to be said for festivals like the one we're amidst. This entering into liturgical time that a three-day festival would have us do, this departure from chronological time, productive time, as a triduum would have us do, comes with real blessing.

What's more, Halloween, All Hallow's Eve, which we celebrate (as we all know) by putting on a costume, was indeed back in the day most often celebrated by putting on a costume, dressing up like someone else or something else. After all, it was thought that on All Hallow's Eve the restless spirits of these recently departed were roaming around looking for those on whom they deserved a bit of vengeance. You'd dress up like someone else or something else in case some not-yet-fully departed spirit had a bone to pick with you. Making yourself harder to recognize was to play it safe.

Setting aside the logic behind the practice, of which I'll admit I'm skeptical, there is a blessed relief in pretending from time to time to be someone else, something else. We all need a break on occasion from the life we've made. We all need a break on occasion from ourselves. That's what vacations are for, as two weeks ago I was doing, sitting poolside at a Florentine villa while fighting the urge to tell the waitstaff, "I don't actually live like this. But could you bring me another glass of wine?" That's what spa days are for. That's what flights of the imagination are for–reading novels, going to the movies. I'd argue that's what substance use and even addiction are largely about: escape from the toil or pain or boredom or hopelessness or hum-drum that life can be or can at least feel like.

There's something dreary about modern life and its Protestant insistences, more diffuse now, but still there, so get to work.

I don't know enough about how festivals and carnival served the people as a practice of their faith back when they were common, but I suspect there was a quality of play and pretend and release and relief that came with it–and that stripped of that, there's an impoverishing of practice. Our Pilgrim forebears would never let us not be ourselves, as God knows us to be, as God with God's all-seeing gaze knows us all too well to be. Our Puritan forbears would only hardly let us take a break from our work, our saving work, lest the devil get us. Idle hands and all…

Which maybe why the move among many Protestant congregations to embrace once again these feast days. This might be what such renewing of old practices is all about. An admission that maybe we went too far? An admission that maybe we threw out the baby with the bathwater?

Let's pretend! Let's be "as if," and even "what if?"

Let's enter into liturgical time, wherein the line between hope and reality thins out, wherein the boundary between what's said and what's actual breaks down, where memory and anticipation interchange.

Christianity, it's said, is a faith in the already and the not yet. Christ has already done the saving work. We yet wait in faith while its full blessings yet come.

Time bends and circles back and doubles down in our faith. Time thins out and grows ripe in our faith.

Not for nothing, one of the liturgical readings for All Saints' Day always comes from the Book of Revelation, some portion of it. It's a strange book, for obvious reasons–populated by beasts and symbols, significant numbers and scary events anticipated to be. It's a strange book also for less obvious reasons, one of which is that it speaks of a foretold future but does so from a moment in the distant past.

Much of the Bible does speak from the distant past, and one of the arts of reading the Bible well, indeed faithfully, is to account for what that distant past probably was and probably felt like.

What's more, many of the books of the Bible speak of an anticipated future, such as the books of the prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah. But they foretell events that then come to pass, leaving the reader mostly settled as to what's being spoken of. We don't read Jeremiah and then ourselves watch the horizon for the coming of Babylon. Though the voices we hear

speaking, are indeed waiting in dread for this to happen, it then happens and the matter is settled so that dread, though we might relate to it, isn't precisely ours.

But the Revelation to John: it speaks to us from a distant past but it tells of things yet to happen that haven't happened, haven't *yet* happened..

Really, it tells us what the moment was from which the book comes. In the first chapter, the first several verses: a man named John is set to tell of the vision he received while exiled to the island called Patmos, a prison island to which people deemed dangerous were sent into exile. John further tells us that he was sent into such exile because of his belief in Jesus and his likely resistance, even troubling resistance, to the ways of the Roman Empire, the brutal, arrogant ways of the Roman Empire.

The revelation he then spells out is a disguised series of judgements and punishing violence unto the powers at work in the world. It tells of things he's been told will come to pass, things that promise vengeance on those who, by any measure, seem to deserve it: Rome, Nero, all his minions and legions, while safeguarding the churches within Rome's bloody reach.

But the fact that this is all told in the future tense, told as things that will happen, but that in history don't happen means it's always speaking of the unfulfilled future, even when we read it today. What punishing events are to befall the unjust don't really happen. I mean, Rome falls but it doesn't fall into a lake of fire–at least not as far as we know. And Nero is a beast, but he never was actually marked "666."

None of this bears out in the historical record.

And yet the Bible says it will.

Therefore, reading this book with any hope for its being true means keeping your eye on the horizon, and keeping your sense of being a victim and your thirst for vengeance alive.

Because John of Patmos was so thirsty for reasons that are real. He really *had* suffered at the hands of Rome. He likely *had* seen friends tortured, villages destroyed. He really had been sent into exile, which we shouldn't imagine was a restful state, Greek island notwithstanding. People vacation on Patmos now; not so then.

What's more, he had no capacity for helping such cosmic vengeance come to pass. Bloodlust from such a powerless one seems understandable and non-threatening.

As for those now who read this book to evoke for themselves such a mindset, such a disturbing hope…?

This vision of the future has reached its expiration date. The torment of your enemies, the destruction of whole societies, even when they seem to deserve it: we've reached the expiration date of such disturbing hope. Because we know too much. We've *seen* too much, and we're capable of far too much. We as a whole world have seen too much of what happens when violence, even so-called righteous violence, is given too loose a leash. We as a whole people from pole to pole know all too well how vengeance never meets peace, how blood-letting never actually purifies such that only good remains–which we know because we've tried it.

After Auschwitz, still the bomb, Revelation is to be carefully read.

On All Saints' Day, it is read for its vision of the saints. Not for its spooky view of some promised cosmic future, and not even for its fury against empire, it's read for its assurance that blessing awaits those who've been a blessing in the world and even more so for its simply recognizing that there *are* saints in the world and they amount to a great multitude, so great in number that no one could count. They're from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, and they've come out of the great ordeal.

And, of course, for John of Patmos the great ordeal was Rome's menacing history, Rome's war against the Jews and the Jewish-Christians that lasted 60 years, that left Jerusalem a smoldering ghost town, and drove any who survived into exile themselves. He means any who persevered amidst an empire that had no heart for anyone, and had only threat and death for many, making it through while staying true to the Jesus way, resistant of violence, honoring but the Lamb, an image tender and good.

As for what we might take this to mean, if we dare to live by this book in some way, we might see history itself as a great ordeal, something we're to endure in faith and hope, through good fortune and bad, through peaceful days and terrifying, amidst beautiful surroundings and ones of devastation and destruction, something amidst which we're to seek not our own glory but, even in the living of our days, the glory of God.

Thus are the saints.

Which is one thing we Protestants have gotten right (which isn't to say the one and only thing.) We Protestants understand sainthood just right, if you ask me–these to include

the great ones of history, (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King Jr., Dorothy Day) while also the ones but personally known to us, the ones whom I spoke of at Lynn's memorial service this summer. The saints of our faith tradition are the people you call when the church roof is leaking, when the youth group gets a flat tire on their way home from a service project, when the choir needs a tenor for Christmas Eve. They're the ones who teach us how to love, show us how to serve, demonstrate for us trustworthiness and kindness, courage and strength, good will and good cheer and good humor. They're the ones who show us Christ, that we might show Christ to the ones next to come.

It's such as these whom we remember today.

We remember, ours a house of remembering as much as a house of hope, ours a house built to witness to God, whose mind, grand and all encompassing, is a mind for remembering as much as God's heart is for hope.

Another tenant of popular faith, though less in church, more amidst the secular, is that we will never forget, we will always remember. This is a phrase evoked to instill comfort, to itch forth the conviction that we won't repeat the worst events of our past and that we'll never forget those lost in these.

But we will. The human mind forgets. Even human minds working together forget. There are things in history that are forgotten to history–probably most things, maybe even everything,

maybe even everyone.

I will be forgotten. Mine will be like those names on those graves just outside our windows, naming people mostly forgotten, carved on stones that will even themselves eventually wear out.

This annihilating forgetting: this is a terrible and terrifying darkness.

But imagining my life placed in God's mind, laid unto God's imagining and God's aim that all shall be gathered in, brings light to such darkness. It comforts, and it seems true. When I revisit the whole schema of God as the origin and therefore the end, God dwelling in time and beyond time, God bringing spirit to matter by which to animate some certain things and God holding to that promise of life even when it seems to have passed from some certain matter-Larson and Arturo, Lynn and Susan, so much of matter–it seems true that God who creates also remembers.

Which is part of the holy work we do here. We remember. We (that is) reattach that which seems dismembered, cut off, forgotten. And we submit our feeble memories and minds to the mighty and unforgetting mind of God, recalling to our minds the fact of God every Sunday.

So there is as much reason, and perhaps more, for older people to join us here as for young families. There is, moreover, as much sustaining spirit in such new membership, older people coming along, signing up, lending a hand, giving their heart and soul, to the enduring work of congregations like this one.

The reason: we remember. The appeal to such people at such a stage in life: together with God, we remember. We will even remember you. When “we” are made up of an entirely different collection of people, when “we” no longer includes any of us now here, “we” will yet remember you and you and me, an enduring witness to even the most ordinary and therefore seemingly forgettable of things, of people. We will remember. We, with God, will remember.

Just as we do today.

Thanks be to God.