

Sermon for Sunday, November 1, 2020 - "Grief Is a Thin Place"

All Saints Sunday
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

[Click here to read scripture passages for the day.](#)

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

All Saints Sunday is a day that holds so much - so much grief and hope, longing and promise. In many ways, it is a thin place. Celtic Christians use the term "thin place" to describe places and times where the boundary between heaven and earth feels more permeable, when we experience God more fully.

On All Saints Day we enter into the thin and mysterious spaces between life and death, between what is and what is yet to come. All Saints Day allows us to linger in the mystery: to honor our grief even as we practice hope and to experience the presence of the whole communion of saints - that great cloud of witnesses from every time and place who surround us always.

On most All Saints Sundays, there are particular ways we enter into this thin place and linger in mystery. We see the faces of beloved saints around us in the pews and join our voices with them in song. We are surrounded by candles reminding us of saints who've gone before and newly baptized saints. We share in holy communion, gathered with the saints around the throne, the choirs of angels and all the hosts of heaven, and we join in their unending hymn singing holy, holy, holy God. We share a foretaste of the feast to come. Then we go sit at tables in the Fellowship Hall and share in a wonderful feast of coffee, tea, fruit, cheese, nuts and sweets.

I miss all that with an ache I feel deep in my bones. I am guessing that you do, too. All Saints Day is a good day for paying attention to that aching, that longing to be together in the flesh with those we can't see during the pandemic and with those who have died.

I don't know who you are missing today on this All Saints Sunday. I am missing my mom Ann Lee, my dad Bob, my dear friend Sarah, and so many saints of Good Shepherd. I am missing their laughter, the sound of their voices, the twinkles in their eyes, the jokes and stories they told. I am missing all of you and wishing we were together in a shared physical space. I don't know who you are missing today, but it is a holy thing for us to pause and pay attention to their names ... to the empty places they left in our lives ... to the ache we still carry in our hearts and in our chests.

I want you to hold the ache you feel today, that longing to be with those who are distant now because of the pandemic, that longing for those saints you love who have entered the church triumphant. Hold that ache and know that it, too, is a thin place, a place to experience God. Let yourself feel it and hear these words of blessing for you. Blessed are you who mourn, for you will be comforted. Blessed are you who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for you will be filled. Jesus' words in our Gospel reading today show us that it is in our times of brokenness, need, and grief that we

most fully meet God. These times of sorrow are thin places, places where we can deeply experience God's presence with us.

That is good news for us now in this very difficult fall of 2020. We who are poor in spirit, who mourn our loved ones and so many lost to COVID; we who feel meek, cowed by brute force of the pandemic, polarization, and violence; we who long for things to be different, who are hungering and thirsting for that; we are met in these very places by God. We are blessed in these places not because they are such enviable places to be, but because God is present with us there and God's presence is the deepest blessing. God's presence with us in our pain heals us and transforms us into people who can be a blessing for others - into people who are merciful, pure in heart, peacemakers who are able to endure suffering and even persecution for the sake of God's righteousness.

Blessed are you dear ones, for God is with you. You are not alone. God is present **and** you are accompanied by the whole communion of saints, by a great cloud of witnesses who surround you and help you to run with perseverance the race set before you. When I picture that cloud of witnesses cheering us on, I call to mind a beautiful image from my own life. I picture a day that I spent with my mom and my son Nate when he was a toddler. Nate and I had gone to visit my parents while my husband Matt was away training to be a national guard chaplain. I'd been solo parenting for a long stretch and was hoping to go for a short run; but Nate was already missing his dad and did not want me out of his sight. He didn't even want to be in the jogging stroller because he couldn't see me pushing the stroller from behind.

My mom suggested we all go together to a park where she and Nate could sit together and watch me run in circles near them. She sat beside him in his stroller and got him excited about cheering for me as I ran. "Go mama go, go mama go," they'd yell. When I'd get to the far edge of the circle Nate's voice would get a little panicky, like he wasn't sure he could trust that mama would come back. Then my mom would yell with even more joy and energy, "Go mama go." She helped him to know that I was there even when it was harder to see me.

A few months after this my mom died suddenly. For weeks I felt like a panicked toddler who didn't want my mama to be out of my sight. The ache in my chest was so great it almost took my breath away. But then one day I went out running and the panicked, achy feeling I got reminded me of that day with Mom and Nate. I could hear her and see her cheering for me. I realized she is still doing that as part of the great cloud of witnesses. I felt God beside me helping me to trust that, even when it is hard for me to see it.

The pain became a thin place, a place to experience the presence of God and the presence of the whole communion of saints. This is still true today. That ache in my chest opens me to know that God is present and that I am surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. It opens me to receive God's blessings and let them flow through me to others.

Beloved of God,

You are not alone. God is with you and you are surrounded by the whole communion of saints. They cheer you on as you run your race. God comes beside you to help you to trust this even when it is hard to see. God meets you in the ache and the mystery of this day to assure you that you are blessed by the presence of God. God meets you in the ache and pain of this time to assure you that you are blessed by the presence of God.

That blessing transforms you, and transforms us, to be people who are blessings for this whole hurting world. We don't have to feel strong and prepared and on top of things in order to be a healing and helpful presence in these difficult days. Instead, the sorrow and emptiness we feel open us to receive God's blessings, to let God's blessings flow through us.

Let's take a moment for silent prayer.