

Nine years ago, Hathy and Graham and James and I “snuck” into the back of this parish as people scoping out St. Francis. It was the first and last time I worshipped here as “not” your rector. All Saints Day is for me the greatest of gifts—the holiest of days—and one of the primary reasons I found my way to the Episcopal Church, not to mention St. Francis! Nine years later as we celebrate the Feast of All Saints I am so profoundly aware of those I have baptized, and those I have buried, in the time I have been privileged to be among you as pastor and priest.

“*In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.*” (Genesis 1:1) Those are the opening words of the Bible—even if they are not the earliest words written. In fact they probably were written during the Babylonian exile—a time of profound grief and despair. Yet in the midst of the chaos, the priestly writer discerns a purpose and pattern in God’s creation. While completely aware of what it’s like to experience the absence of God, the writer is able to see nonetheless that God is present with each sunrise. In the face of evil, a bold and even defiant claim is made: God sees the world and calls it good.

At the other end of the Bible—deep into the final chapters of the *last* book of the Bible, we hear in the Revelation of St. John of a *new* creation: “a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away.”

John lived in the midst of a decaying Roman empire; his context wasn’t that different from the priestly writers who lived during the Babylonian exile. And yet John imagines a world made new again. His vision is about the fulfillment of God’s purposes for creation—the answer to the prayer we pray each time we gather here: “thy kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven.”

Some of us have been taught to think of heaven as a place “out there”—a place we go “up to” after we die. But as John imagines it, humans don’t go “up” but rather God comes “down” at the culmination of human history:

I saw the holy city, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God...and I heard a loud voice...saying: ‘See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples and God himself will be with them....’

Whenever Jesus speaks of the Kingdom of God/Reign of God, he is talking about those glimpses we get every now and again of what John saw with such clarity on the island of Patmos. He is talking about those moments when we get glimpses of that new heaven and new earth.

Perhaps it is for us as with the prophet Isaiah: you are at a table with friends and the food is superb and the wine is flowing and there is laughter and joy. In such moments, God is present. Heaven touches earth. Or when a blind beggar sees again. Or when Lazarus is raised from the dead. Or when any one of us is unbound—from whatever it is that binds us and keeps us from living. Or when a drunk walks into a meeting and says, “My name is Jim and I’m an alcoholic.” And life begins again—one day at a time. Or when a cry for help is heard and a community responds with compassion rather than judgment, and with love rather than fear. We glimpse in

all of those moments what John saw with such clarity: the new Jerusalem, the new Holden, the new St. Francis.

We live our lives between the beginning and the end—literally. We live between Genesis 1 and Revelation 21. We live “in Christ”—alpha and omega. We live here in the old Worcester County, yearning for the Kingdom to come here and now—on earth as it is in heaven.

It is tempting to want to somehow get back to Eden. The literal Eden perhaps—located according to some scholars somewhere in modern-day Iraq. But I mean the figurative Edens of our lives as well: that age of innocence—that time in our lives when all was safe and innocent and good. I pray that every child in this town and the surrounding towns has a long time in Eden—that Dawson and Davis Hill and Mayo are all little “Edens”—places of wide-eyed innocence and curiosity and peace.

We know, of course, that they are not that way for everyone. Pain and sin and death do creep in even there. But we long for those places to be as close to Eden as humanly possible: for all of our children to be safe and loved and cared for. Surely we pray for that for Jillian, who is baptized today.

But none of us can stay there. Eventually, life becomes more difficult—in Middle School, in high school, in our work. We discover that it is truly a “fallen world.” We discover Sin—not as an abstract theological concept but for real. We face all kinds of choices and sometimes we don’t choose wisely. We face temptations in spite of the prayer not to be led into them; and sometimes we fail to resist. And there is no escaping this. It is part of the nature of life—it’s what growing up is about. We know full well as we baptize Jillian that we cannot protect her forever; that at best we can equip her—nurture her, love her and send her forth with our fervent prayers.

The Bible—the whole thing in between Genesis 1 and Revelation 21 is about this world that we encounter around us—about the “real” world. Above all else that is what I hope we are teaching our kids in church school, and in Confirmation classes. It’s easy to think of the Bible as taking place in Bible-land—some far-off place where people wear funny clothes and talk with Elizabethan accents. But the Bible is about human frailty and tragedy and denial: it’s about broken promises and betrayals and hurts and wars and the ways that power corrupts and greed consumes. It is tempting to become nostalgic and long for Eden but we can’t go back there. It is tempting once we realize that to despair, especially when the world around us feels out of control and when government, the church, the environment, our schools, healthcare are not what they are meant to be. Despair can get the best of us, and will in the end get the best of us if we aren’t able to find a third way.

In her investiture sermon yesterday, our new Presiding Bishop spoke of God’s shalom—which as she pointed out is rooted in the Church’s understanding of the Reign of God/Kingdom of God. She spoke eloquently, I think, about that peace of God that passes all understanding, asking of all of us:

What keeps us from the tireless search for that vision of shalom? There are probably only two answers, and they are connected - apathy and fear. One is the unwillingness to acknowledge the pain of other people, the other is an unwillingness to acknowledge that pain with enough courage to act.

And then she said: “*The cure for each is a deep and abiding hope.*”

Christianity is about this third way. Christianity is about living with hope. We know how the story ends—it’s the mystery of the faith we remember here each weekend: *Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.*

We worship a God whose home really is among mortals—for we have seen the face of that God in Jesus Christ. He has dwelt among us, and will dwell among us—to wipe away every tear from every eye. And death will be no more and mourning and crying and pain will be no more. We worship a God who is making all things new—even as we speak.

Our work as the Church—the baptized community—is to be about the work of helping to birth that new creation. We are all called to be midwives. The whole creation is groaning in travail—and until that new creation is fully realized our work is not yet finished.

We are called to tend to it and care for it where it is already present. Our job is to keep our eyes open for the new Jerusalem and the new Worcester County and the new Holden—those “thin places” where heaven and earth are already touching. We cannot go back to Eden and so we have no choice but to press on toward the City of God, cultivating hope as the antidote to fear and apathy.

All Saints Day means many different things to many different people. But underlying all of them is this witness to hope—this reminder that we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses who have gone before us and lived through difficult days; and yet refused to lose heart. I think of Julian of Norwich, who lived during the black plague. Yet it was she who said: “all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.” I think of Dr. King who lived through Jim Crow and watched fire hoses being used as weapons of fear, yet who didn’t give up on the dream of a day when all God’s children would be judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

I think of the founding members of this parish—some of whose ashes are buried in the Garden just beyond that wall—who believed that while Lutherans and Roman Catholics and Congregationalists are all good folks, there was a need for an Episcopal presence in this town. They held a vision of a parish committed to Christian formation and to youth ministry even before there was a building to meet in. We are the beneficiaries of their fidelity.

Our work on All Saints Sunday and throughout the year is to give thanks for all those who have gone before us and to not lose heart. It is to press on toward the New Jerusalem, for the sake of those who will follow us and whom we hope will remember us for our faithfulness. Our work is to live between what is now and what is not yet by working with the Creator of heaven and earth in making all things new. That vision really is “trustworthy, and true.”