

St. Francis Episcopal Church: The Feast of All Saints
Text: Daniel 7:1-3, 15-18
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Two weeks ago I preached a sermon about how I think we are called as Episcopalian Christians to read the Bible. In that sermon I spoke about my paternal grandparents, Ernest and Esther Simpson, and about how even as a kid I would argue with them over the interpretation of Scripture. One person who spoke with me after that sermon felt that I was disrespecting my grandparents.

On this All Saints' weekend I want to set the record straight for anyone who may have been left with that impression. My view is that love and agreement are not the same things. I am a person with many opinions, sometimes strong opinions and sometimes wrong opinions. Many of my closest friends and family members, whom I love dearly, have equally strong but differing opinions. (And they are quite often wrong!) I think love gives us the freedom to disagree—and even (as I said two weeks ago) that this is part and parcel of what the Bible is for: not to get us to intellectual agreement in our heads, but to love one another. Our unity in Christ is not about having the same beliefs but about being called into fellowship with one another through Holy Baptism.

My grandmother is one of the saints in my life—one of the people who in addition to being biologically my grandmother helped to raise me into the full stature of Christ. She taught me to love Jesus, and she taught me to love the Bible as a way to better know and follow Jesus. She read her Bible every day, using a resource called “Our Daily Bread” along with her King James Bible. When the message for the day struck her in a particular way she would clip it and send it to me with a note at college. She taught me to use the Bible and not to be afraid of it; the pages of hers were tattered and worn from use. She never heard as far as I know of a “lectionary” and her church didn't use scripture inserts; everyone was expected to bring their Bible along to worship. Over the course of her life she must have read the Bible cover-to-cover many times over. The stories were real to her, and through her they became real to me.

As far as I can trust my memory, I have to say that I don't remember ever studying anything from the Book of Daniel in my Methodist Sunday School, or for that matter even (sadly) in my Old Testament classes in seminary. Daniel was too often treated among mainline Protestants as an embarrassment—the Old Testament equivalent of the Book of Revelation—and the two of them together were viewed as something like inviting John the Baptist to a wine and cheese reception. But my grandmother loved Daniel: for her they were stories of resistance and hope.

So she would tell me about Daniel in the lion's den. Do you know the story? About how all the king's men established an ordinance and issued a decree about prayer—and that anyone who didn't pray to the king would be thrown into the lion's den. But Daniel refused to follow such an unjust edict. He showed courage and defied the decree, trusting in the Lord. When he was thrown into the lion's den as a punishment, the lions miraculously lost their appetites.

Or she would tell me that great story about Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego who also refused to worship false gods and for their obedience to the true God they were thrown into a furnace to be burned alive. The king was so filled with rage that he ordered the furnace turned up seven times more than was customary and they were thrown into the blazing fire. But guess what? They were protected!

As a kid I wanted to know whether or not these stories were real—by which I meant simply did it really *happen* like that? My grandmother assured me that they had happened just like that—something I found hard to believe then and now. But as an adult I am less concerned about whether or not these stories are *literally* true because I am profoundly aware that stories like this are “true” in ways that go way beyond reporting current events. The world of Daniel is a world of imperial power: a world of decrees and secret police and authorizations and having “papers in order.” That language permeates the text. And the question being raised in that context is this one: what does it mean to be a person of faith in such a world? How can you hold onto your faith in a hostile world that is not your true home?

It may not be our daily reality, but it is a reality many Christians still face and *All Saints Day* is as good a time as any to remember that we are Christians together with people all around the world. Seven of our members are heading this week to El Salvador—we’ll commission them in just a few minutes. The history of Central America is a world not so different from Daniel’s—a world that has known too often of corrupt and powerful governments intent on destroying the creatures of God. In the face of decrees and secret police and “authorizations,” the faith of people like Oscar Romero and the Jesuit martyrs stands as a witness not very different from that of Daniel or of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego—a faith that stands up for what is right and is courageous even in the face of violence and degradation and torture. Daniel is, as one scholar puts it, “about resisting the dominant imperial power structures.” It is a subversive text about non-violent resistance. It’s about being able to keep your identity by defining who you are as a child of God, over and against the ways that the empire tries to define you.

Living your faith in such a world can literally make you feel crazy sometimes. I think that is what is going on in the seventh chapter of Daniel, in the reading we heard today. Daniel (like Joseph before him and Martin after him) is a dreamer. He lies down in bed and has these dreams about how one day righteousness will flow like an ever-flowing stream. He has this dream of a world where every human being is treated with dignity and respect and where people strive for justice. He has this dream of a world that I imagine is quite similar to what Jesus describes in the Sermon on the Mount: *Blessed are the poor, and the hungry, and those who weep...*

And yet Daniel also has this recurring nightmare. Imperial power can literally make you crazy. Threatening the dream of God are these visions in his head that terrify Daniel, and trouble his spirit, and keep him tossing and turning in his bed. The beasts (that is to say, kings who misuse their power and wreak havoc on God’s people) are an ever-present reality for Daniel; a part of his everyday life.

Ultimately this text before us today is no different than the story of the lion’s den or the story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. It asks the question of where your allegiance really lies. It dares to insist that we live by our dreams rather than our nightmares, because we belong to God.

While acknowledging that the world can be a dangerous and even terrifying place, the encouragement in Daniel is that God's people are called to stand tall, and to be not afraid, and to model an alternative way of life that is truly life giving. Ultimately the good news in this text is that the "holy ones of the Most High shall receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom for ever—for ever and ever!" (Daniel 7:18)

So I think that makes Daniel a great text for this holy day. We remember those who have gone before us, including our own dear ones—our grandmothers and grandfathers and those who told us the "old, old stories" along the way. We remember Sunday school teachers and pastors—all who gave us the gift of faith—sometimes in ways they may not even been aware of. We have received all of that as a gift, or as St. Paul says in today's epistle, as an inheritance.

The saints in our lives (or at least in my life) were not perfect. And for faith to be "owned" and become our own I do believe we need to wrestle with it and challenge it and argue with it. But in the end these are gifts given to us and we gather here to honor them all and to be grateful. But this isn't just our little party. Saints like Archbishop Romero—assassinated while at the altar celebrating the Eucharist and resisting the forces of evil—he is here too. And all whose names are forgotten by us (but not forgotten by God)—that great cloud of white-robed martyrs who have gone the way of the lion's den or the ovens or the cross—they are here, too. They, too, are a part of us—part of the communion of saints. We sing today for all of them and with all of them.

That one holy, catholic and apostolic Church is about to include a new generation of saints like Annika and Hannah and Connor. They represent the next generation of Christian witnesses whose job it will be to let Christ show forth in their lives as the Church continues its work. We promise to uphold them in their faith, and to teach them the stories that we have been taught, and to show them how to love even those with whom they disagree; how even to love their enemies.

The subtleties of our consumer culture are different and in some ways more complex than imperial power. Sometimes it is hard to know exactly where we are called to resist and how. When the bums get to us we can vote them out. But underneath it all there is something much harder to change—and something that goes beyond partisan bickering. We live in a world where there really are powers and principalities that corrupt and destroy the creatures of God. And those powers make it hard to be courageous and brave. It's hard for us let our better angels guide us, to let our dreams (rather than our night terrors) guide our decisions and our actions in the world. One thing I know for sure, though: we cannot do that alone. Every time we celebrate Holy Baptism, but especially in the context of All Saints, we remember that we are in this together by the grace of God.

The work we share is to keep articulating the dream of God and to hold up that vision as true and holy. Our work is to become those "holy ones" of God in this time and place who know that Jesus is truly lord of the universe. Our job is to become a people who live by faith rather than fear, so that the world might believe, until the kingdom comes on earth as it is in heaven...forever and forever and forever.

Amen.