

Message for All Saints, Year A (11/1/2020)  
 Revelation 7:9-17  
 Psalm 34:1-10, 22  
 1 John 3:1-3  
 Matthew 5:1-12

In every time, there have been those who've looked around at the state of the world and concluded that theirs was the end time. *Just look at all that's happening*, they speculate, *doesn't it seem like history is arriving at some sort of culmination?* I'll never forget the words of a gentleman sitting with me in the waiting room of a barber shop in Chicago's South Loop several years ago. "The Lord said we can't know the day or the hour," <sup>1</sup> he said to another patron, referring to Jesus' caution against apocalyptic guesswork. But, then he went on to undermine that same wisdom: "The Lord said we can't know the day or the hour, but we sure can know the season."

If end-times prophets throughout history have one thing common, however, it's that they've all been wrong. The upheavals of one era have given way to the next, and the human community has undergone each successive crisis only to face another. Still, can we really be faulted for wondering about our own time, too? 2020, amirite? How many more signs do we need that things are coming to a head?

What is it, do you suppose, that is so seductive about end-times speculation? Why do we feel the need to interpret our present circumstances in light of God's promise to bring all things to fulfillment in God's time? I have a theory that it has something to do with feelings of insecurity. We like to imagine that we have some semblance of control over our lives, and that the world is generally a safe, predictable place. Of course, that's never been true for people living in communities ravaged by

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 24:36.

political strife and violence, or suffering persecution, or crushed by poverty and disease. But, when large-scale crisis strikes closer to home, we sense that our control is slipping. And, if we can't trust our institutions and social contracts to provide security, then what can we trust? End-times speculation gives a simple answer: *This is all part of a plan, no matter how destructive, to bring about God's final victory.*

This kind of theology may serve to alleviate some anxiety, at least for those who don't endure the worst aspects of any crisis. But, **it also passes over the very real suffering of our neighbors, regarding them as little more than necessary casualties of the divine strategy and thus dissuading us from doing much to accompany them. What's more, it paints God as a sort of compassionless schemer, afflicting the world only to rush in and save some of it, like an arsonist who returns to put out his own fire and thus appear the hero.**

Is that the God we worship? Is that the Lord whom we can taste and see is good; the one who hears us when we cry out in our affliction; the one who blesses – and does not curse – who blesses the poor, the mourners, the meek, and the persecuted? If not, then what can we say of God in the midst of trial and tribulation?

“Who are these [multitudes], and where do they come from?” one of the heavenly elders asks John, the author of Revelation, as he stands near the throne of God in his famous vision of the end. John humbly replies, “Sir, you are the one that knows,” to which the elder responds, “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 [God] day and night within [God's] 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.”

It's a breathtaking picture of salvation, a crowd too big too number from every land and culture gathered in God's eternal care, with the Shepherd-Lamb, the bloodied and risen one, still by their side to lead and guide them. In the end, the Book of Revelation is a message of comfort, not catastrophe<sup>2</sup>; John's dream of the end is an assurance of God's promised future in spite of all the reasons we have to fear. “These are they who have come out of the great ordeal.” That's an image to cherish on All Saints Day 2020.

Friends, we're in the midst of a great ordeal now, much like the generations that came before us. And, although so much theology seeks to escape crisis unscathed, the Christian faith has never turned away from distress and suffering and death, never denied or minimized them. That's the core meaning of the cross, after all. **God does not stand above the world, gazing down on our fraught existence and waiting to be revealed after the damage has been done. Rather, God joins us in it, and finally bears in his own body the wounds of our insecurity. Distress and suffering and death are facts of life, even the life of God.**

Even so, they point beyond themselves to hope. The cross is God's offer of peace in response to our hostility; “the blood of the Lamb” is the sign that God refuses to deal with us on our terms, but only in terms of God's mercy. That's the reason we dare to call the poor, the mourners, the meek, and the persecuted blessed. **They are**

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<sup>2</sup> See Barbara Brown Taylor, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 4, 219.

**blested because theirs is the kingdom that God has prepared; they are blested because they will be comforted; they are blested because they will inherit the world as it was always meant to be; they are blested because distress and suffering and death won't have the final say. "These are they who have come out of the great ordeal."**

As it turns out, **All Saints is not about who we are for God, but who God is for us.** Beloved, we are saints because God has gathered us into God's embrace, bestowing our identity on us like Jesus' blessings in the Sermon on the Mount.<sup>3</sup> **Blessed are you, for you are children of God, held firmly in the love of God in good times and bad.** Blessed are you when you worry and doubt, for you will be reassured. Blessed are you when you are weary and worn, for you will open your arms to the redeemer.<sup>4</sup> Blessed are you when you are cut down, for you will be able to stand again with the multitude and sing: "Blessing and glory and wisdom / and thanksgiving and honor / and power and might / be to our God forever and ever! Amen."

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<sup>3</sup> See [members.sundaysandseasons.com/Home/TextsAndResources/2020-11-1/2168#resources](https://members.sundaysandseasons.com/Home/TextsAndResources/2020-11-1/2168#resources).

<sup>4</sup> Paraphrasing Blaise Pascal, quoted by Earl F. Palmer, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 4, 238.