

All Saints Evening Service

The Feast of All Saints' is especially important in the Episcopal Church. We often speak of "the Communion of Saints;" and All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day reminds us of our belief that *all* Christians that ever lived, are living, and will ever be, are bound together in one "Communion" – the Body of Christ. All Saints' and All Souls' celebrates this bond as we continue the ancient practice of praying **for** the saints who have gone on before us and acknowledge that those saints in heaven are praying **for** us.

In the Apostles' Creed, we proclaim this belief in the "communion of saints," otherwise described as "the whole family of God, the living and the dead, those whom we love and those whom we hurt, bound together in Christ by sacraments, prayer, and praise" (BCP 862). We are linked to all, friend and foe, both past and present.

In the historic church, saints were those in Heaven who were canonized because they lived heroically virtuous lives, offered their life for others, or were martyred for the faith, and consequently considered worthy of imitation. In our lives today, we view saints in a similar, if less glowingly venerated, way. Saints may look like our moms or dads, coaches, teachers, or even friends who impacted our lives and, through our relationship with them, have made us better people.

Tonight, we do not just venerate the saintly. Not everyone can be a beacon of light in this life. But we trust that God's love will preserve and transform us all, in this life or the next. This evening, we will allow our imaginations to open and peer behind the veil that separates life from death. We will recall all of our loved ones, all those who have gone before us, known and unknown, the ones who have made our lives here in 2024 possible.

Christians believe in everlasting life that begins with our first breath and lasts into eternity, long after our last breath is stilled. We are always being led into life because life involves our spirits, not just our physical bodies. Christians also believe that every death ushers in new life. Jesus was raised from the dead in his physical body and ascended into heaven. We understand that our death is also an entrance into new life. So, all those we love and see no more, while changed, are not merely dead, but alive in Christ and supporting us on our journey. Tonight, we remember them with joy, even if it is mixed with grief.

This evening is an invitation into the celebration of what we believe is true, even if we rarely see it with our eyes. Can you smell then incense. We burn incense because it's rising illustrates our prayers ascending into heaven. It's a way for us, for a moment, to physically be drawn out of the seen world and let our senses help us imagine the glory of the world beyond. You will also have the opportunity to light a candle. We light candles for the dead as a visual representation of the light of life that exists in those we love even when their bodies are no longer with us. Lighting candles helps us make the invisible, visible.

Tonight is about the mystery. I invite you to feel your way through it. We will move slowly and give attention to the things we often rush past. Allow yourself to close your eyes, feel with your body, and imagine with your heart. There will be silence. Rest in it. I will let you know when and what to do, so rest and be present. When the time comes to light candles this evening, we will begin singing a hymn and we will repeat it for an extended period of time. Listen or sing as you wish. Light a candle if and when you choose. Come as you will, stay at the table as long as you wish, and eventually I will close that time with a prayer. There are no rules here tonight. Simply enjoy the presence of this great cloud of witnesses.

Rejoicing in What is Unseen

Isaiah 25:6-9
1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

In normal, daily life, we tend to think of death as purely something to be grieved. And that is how we feel it, especially when we're talking about the loss of those we love. But Christians find certainty in the reality of life beyond the grave.

Isaiah speaks of a shroud cast over the people, a sheet spread over the nations. Paul, in his letter to the Thessalonians, talks about the grief people feel from being uninformed about God's ultimate plan of restoration of ALL creation. For both these authors, there was confidence and hope in **knowing** the God who exists beyond the limitations of what our eyes see.

God is the author of life, the creator. We understand that God loves, protects, and preserves the creation. We don't always feel that protection in this life. God gives us the freedom to live how we wish, and that freedom is often misused. Consequently, all of us suffer from the impact of sin and evil, whether from our own missteps or those of others. This is why we confess our sins together every Sunday. The consequences of sin are grave, metaphorically and practically. God's purpose in Jesus was to heal what has been broken, to reconcile the world, and bring it back to its original design. This is why we pray every Sunday for God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven.

God is not confined by time and there is a reality that exists beyond what we can see. On the other side of this veil, the limitations of human flesh, and the insistence of the grave, is a **world** of life as God intended. We read in our Scriptures of the day when God will recreate the earth and we will be restored, in our flesh we will all see God, we will all feast at the banquet, and we will no longer be held captive by the consequences of sin and

suffering. For a God who sees the beginning and the end at the same time, unconstrained by the limitations of time and process, this work is as finished as it is in process. The Spirit of God exists with us through the process of time. God, who is the Author and Finisher of our faith stands beyond the shroud, rejoicing with those who have passed through the grave, in full assurance of the restoration for which we hope.

Until that day comes, we remind ourselves of the faithfulness of God who is present with us. We remind ourselves of our ancestors, our family members, our friends, and even our enemies who live with God now in a world of life beyond anything we can possibly imagine. When Jesus rose from the dead, it was the first time the Greek world had imagined anyone conquering the impenetrable power of death. As a human, Jesus **had** to die. As God, Jesus had to **rise** from the dead. As Creator, God cannot permit the creation to suffer brokenness forever. Jesus' resurrection allows us to see past the limiting ways we understand life and death.

One day we **will** see with unshrouded clarity. "Until that Day dawns, the whole world is in the shadows. We are born into it and therefore we do not recognize that what we call light is but twilight." Tonight, as we remember those who have gone before us, and feel the presence of those with whom we share eternity, we rejoice in the assurance that there is much we do not yet know.

A Letter to the Romans, chapter 8: "I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." Amen.

Please join me, as you feel comfortable, in celebrating this hope, as we light candles to brighten our darkness, reminding ourselves of the ones we love and see no more.

¹ J. Alec Motyer, [*Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary*](#), vol. 20, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 193.