

REVELATION 21:1-6A

¹Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ²And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; ⁴he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away." ⁵And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true." ⁶Then he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life."

HEBREWS 12:1-2

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, ²looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

SERMON

As a pastor, one of the questions I get asked most often is some variation on the theme of "what happens when we die?" It's a question asked quietly, and I can often hear the anxiety behind the questions: what is going to happen to me? What is going to happen to my family? What is going to happen to us? And judging from a lot of scripture, I think this was probably a question people were constantly asking Jesus.

And it's interesting, when you go and look at these parts of the gospels, Jesus doesn't actually answer the question. When people

come to Jesus asking, “What is to come?” Jesus, more often than not, turns the question inside out. Not “What happens after our life is over?” but instead “how are you living right now, in the life you’ve been given?” As we’ve studied the parables this fall, I’m struck by how very many of them start out with: “The kingdom of heaven is like...” and then instead of the pearly gates and a harp on the clouds and endless m+m’s, or whatever your personal view of heaven might be, he gives us stories of life, here and now. A vineyard owner and the workers who pick the grapes, a woman who kneads a quantity of bread dough in her kitchen, a bush large enough to shade a flock of birds, a father and his sons reunited, a man who offers care to his enemy left to die on the side of the road. Again and again, Jesus pulls our eyes away from heaven and sets them back on the world we’re in right now. There’s something about the life that we live here which becomes, in a sense, the kingdom of heaven in our midst.

With Jesus, the kingdom of heaven, again and again, is found in the ordinary. Bread and wine from the kitchen counter, fair wages for the worker, caring for your neighbor, the relationships among and between us. What makes it extraordinary is the fact that where the kingdom is found all people have enough.

And so for today, as we celebrate All Saint’s Day and give thanks for the beautiful lives of our friends and family members who have passed away before us, let’s dwell for some time in the ordinary. Let’s remember them in the everyday, mundane, routine parts of who they were. For me, I cherish the memory of Alice Allstetter standing up here at the bell table, ringing along with the others on Christmas Eve. It’s a memory many of you probably have of Alice

stretching back over decades of Christmas Eve services. It's routine, but there's something of the kingdom there, celebrated in bells ringing to announce the birth of a baby.

And I remember Tuesday afternoons with Vern. So often following Rotary we'd sit together in my office, trading stories and news, trafficking in the currency of the community. Nothing extraordinary or earth shattering, but I do believe the kingdom was present in the ways we enacted care for this church community, together.

I'll keep in my heart the images of my grandma, Ruth. The bowl of nuts on her counter, the jar of gummy bears, the bunk beds with the blue comforter. Her slightly insane habit of ironing everything in her whole house, bedsheets, kitchen towels, ratty sweatshirts, and socks included. In those small ways, she lived a lifelong ministry of hospitality, sharing the welcome of the kingdom in each glass of wine and slice of bread shared around her table.

In this letter to the Hebrews we have a beautiful image woven of the great cloud of witnesses. Moses and Miriam, Abraham and Sarah, Rahab, David, and Solomon. All the great and powerful forbearers of our faith, gathered together, cheering us on in this life we're living. It has the potential to be an almost overwhelming image, filled with celebrity and thousands of years of stories told and retold. However, I don't think that's what the writer is getting at here. I think that instead of the untouchable greatness of these folks, the writer of this letter is more concerned with the fact of their commonality with us. They lived a life of faith, and now they are gathered here, with us, surrounding us in our life of faith. And in my mind, it's not just the biblical Moses and Ruth there, but it's also my

grandma Ruth, my son Moses, my friend Vern, my sister Alice, this community, the living and the dead. The great cloud of witnesses is us, all of us, gathered together across time and space, the body of Christ throughout the life and the life to come.

And so in answer to those questions of deepest longing and concern: what happens next? Where do we go? Where did they go? I have two responses to offer. The first is the story of the parables that we've been living: take your eyes off the clouds and away from heaven and instead focus them on the ground right in front of you. Live in such a way as to bring the kingdom of heaven here and now, in your kitchen, at your table, in your office, and in this community. The Kingdom of Heaven is here, among us! And then, give thanks for those saints who have lived their life, run the race, been an example of the kingdom in our midst. Give thanks for all in them that was good and thoughtful and kind. And in your thanksgiving, know that they are not gone. They are here, gathered around us, joining us at this table, a great cloud of witnesses, the people of faith, cheering us on as we do the work of the kingdom in this beautiful world God have given to us. Thanks be to God! Amen.