

“All Saints—A Day to Remember”

Salado UMC, Salado, Tx 76571—Preaching Text: Joel 2:18-26

1 November 2020—22nd Sunday after Pentecost

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**“If debugging is the art of removing bugs,
then programming must be the art of inserting them.”**

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All Saints Sunday means more and more to me as more and more of my friends become “the dearly departed.” A friend in Nebraska once wrote in a sermon about a wonderful book that has merit—especially on a day like All Saints Sabbath. He wrote about a book, *Saints, Sinners, and Beechers*. In this book Lyman Beecher tells the story of an occasion when Thomas K. Beecher substituted for his famous preacher brother Henry Ward Beecher at the Plymouth Church in Brooklyn. Many people in the congregation had come to hear the renowned Henry Beecher preach. When Thomas Beecher appeared in the pulpit, some of the people started for the door. Sensing their disappointment, Thomas Beecher raised his hand for silence and said, “All those who came here this morning to worship Henry Ward Beecher may withdraw from the church, and all those who came to worship God may remain.”

Of course, when we worship on All Saint’s Sabbath, we do not worship any individual but rather we are here to remember that “we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses” (Hebrews 12:1). We worship to remember those saints who have given us models by which to live out our Christian faith. It is our prayer that the memory of those saints who have gone before us will help each of us become more faithful to the covenant that God has cut with us. Hear our lesson, Joel 2:18-26:

18 Then the Lord became passionate about this land, [a] and had pity on his people.

19 The Lord responded to the people:

See, I am sending you

the corn, new wine, and fresh oil,

and you will be fully satisfied by it;
and I will no longer make you
a disgrace among the nations.

20 I will remove the northern army far from you
and drive it into a dried-up and desolate land,
its front into the eastern sea,
and its rear into the western sea.
Its stench will rise up;
its stink will come to the surface.

The Lord is about to do great things!

21 Don't fear, fertile land;
rejoice and be glad,
for the Lord is about to do great things!

22 Don't be afraid, animals of the field,
for the meadows of the wilderness will turn green;
the tree will bear its fruit;
the fig tree and grapevine will give their full yield.

23 Children of Zion,
rejoice and be glad in the Lord your God,
because he will give you the early rain as a sign of righteousness;
he will pour down abundant rain for you,
the early and the late rain, as before. [b]

24 The threshing floors will be full of grain;
the vats will overflow with new wine and fresh oil.

25 I will repay you for the years
that the cutting locust,
the swarming locust, the hopping locust, and the devouring locust have
eaten—
my great army, which I sent against you.

26 You will eat abundantly and be satisfied,
and you will praise the name of the Lord your God,
who has done wonders for you;
and my people will never again be put to shame (Joel 2:18-26).

Joel 2 concerns hope. Most individuals have met situations that seemed out of their control. As much as we dislike it, being human is to lack control in life. Still, as people we covet control. Yet, the gap between what we want, and what is, is what the great sages call the human condition or human predicament. In any form, our not being in control delivers anxious feelings as we recognize our human limits.

As prophets warn, Yahweh judges Judah for sin. Judah/Israel seems no longer to control its destiny—now at the mercy of a swarm/plague of locusts. From this gloomy situation, abject fear arises. Joel now announces a prophetic word of hope. Those people who experience their ruin by way of locusts, understand what it means to become a people bereft of hope. Do you recall a situation in which you felt hopeless and powerless?

I remember passing Christmas Day in 1976 in Bartlesville, Oklahoma, with a college friend and his family. He and I had driven to and from a wedding in Milwaukee. I remember the events so clearly because it was the first Christmas I ever spent away from home. On Christmas afternoon we played touch football with a group of his friends, all home from college. In the middle of our game, we noticed smoke rising from a neighboring block. We edged in for a closer look. We discovered, to our shock, that there in the middle of a residential neighborhood, a house stood in full blaze. It burned so quickly that even the firefighters stood by helplessly. As we watched with the firefighters, we soon sensed that the family standing by were the house's occupants. We could not imagine them witnessing this grim scene—and on Christmas Day! This occasion offered a bitter sample of hopelessness. Perhaps the fire was a faint echo of what Judah felt as they watched locusts eat next year's foodstuffs. When people in the United States or Australia watch homes and property burn, it is a similar hopelessness. Plainly, we feel hopeless when we watch a raging fire burn. As locusts consumed Judah's crops, it must have been like watching hope go up in smoke.

Against this forbidding background, Joel paints a foreground of hope. I realize that few of us understand the degree of hopelessness to which Joel prophesies. Most of us, if we look at the vast, lingering depiction of human suffering, cannot put our suffering in the same category of scenes portrayed in the film "Schindler's

List” or the tragedy that stunned the community at Blacksburg, Virginia—at Virginia Tech University a decade and a half ago (April 2007). Still, most of us have waited for the doctor’s or a loved one’s phone call, about “the tests.” We sense the sinking feeling when we hear of a nearby car crash. We hope against hope that our child or a loved one is not involved. Anxiety is where human beings live.

Along with gospel truth and the measure by which God judges our lives, God likewise confers a precious gift—the gift of hope. Paul writes, “faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love” (1 Corinthians 13:13). Yet honestly, if love is the cake, then hope is undoubtedly the icing on the cake. Hope sweetens life’s experience. Deprived of hope, we shrivel and die from the inside out. We all know people who have given up hope. Hopelessness is one of the most deadening aspects of being homeless or existing in poverty. So, to give someone hope is a precious gift indeed. God furnishes us this gift of hope. God’s promise, presented in hope, is to abide with us. This is Joel’s message for today.

As we know, we cannot earn a gift; someone must give it. Someone who gives without strings attached has given a true gift. If someone gives a gift with strings, then it is not, strictly speaking, a gift. It may be something, but whatever that something is, it is not a gift.

The gift that God gives us in our hopelessness is the gift of God’s promise through Jesus Christ. In our lesson from Joel, the locusts eat both Judah’s produce and livelihood. But today as Christians, we eat and celebrate God’s gift of hope in Jesus at the table of the Lord. At this table we again experience the pure promise of God—for us. God’s offer of hope restores people of faith.

All Saints is a day to remember. God wants each one of us in the covenant fold, but God simply invites—God does not coerce, force, or threaten, that is if one understands that “God is love” (1 John 4:8, 16). I like the story that Karl Stegall tells of two brothers who entered the first grade in 1991. One said he was born on January 1, 1984. The other brother said he was born on April 4, 1984. “That is impossible,” said the teacher. “No,” replied the first brother, “one of us is adopted.”

“Which one?” asked the teacher.

“I don’t know,” he replied. “One day I asked my mother and she kissed us both and said, ‘I forgot.’ ”

Perhaps this is the method by which we become saints. God kisses us all and forgets which ones of us God has adopted and which ones of us are naturals.

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