

“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” (Genesis 1:1) If you sit down to read the Bible and start at the very beginning (“a very good place to start!”) then those are the very first words you will read. What follows is really a prayer—a litany that makes the theological claim that in spite of the chaos we sometimes experience in the world and in our own lives, God is the Source of all life. God speaks the Word, and worlds emerge: sun and moon and stars and oceans and deserts and mountains and wildflowers and trees and sparrows and turtles and whales and every living thing. *And God saw that it was good.* And there is evening and there is morning, the first day; the second day, the third day...until finally there is a day of rest. And God pronounces that it is all extraordinarily good.

At the other end of the Bible—in the final chapters of the *last* book of the Bible, we hear in the Revelation of St. John about a *new* creation: “a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away.” John lived in the midst of a decaying Roman empire. The world around him was literally coming apart at the seams. But contrary to the ways that this book is sometimes read and interpreted, John isn’t looking for the rapture. He isn’t looking for a divine rescue attempt that will beam him up to heaven. John of Patmos is a mystic who believes the prayer Jesus taught his disciples: “thy kingdom come *on earth* as it is in heaven.” At the end of days, as John imagines things, it is not human beings who will join God in heaven but God who will join human beings on earth:

I saw the holy city, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God...and I heard a loud voice...saying: ‘See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples and God himself will be with them....’

Today on this Feast of All Saints we heard from the seventh chapter of that oft-misunderstood vision. John offers us a glimpse of his vision for community—a vision of heaven that is meant to challenge us here on earth.

*After this I, John, looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying,
“Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!”*

Like John of Patmos, we live in between that first good creation and that second new creation. We live in a world that sometimes feels like it is coming unglued and we sometimes live lives where the chaos threatens to overwhelm order. The mystical vision shared with us in the last book of the Bible is not meant to predict the future like some reader of Tarot cards or palms might do. Nor is it meant to instill fear in our hearts; or worse still to assure us that we are right and our neighbors who disagree with us will be tossed into some fiery lake so that we can revel in their suffering.

This vision is given to the Church and shared through the ages to encourage us and to keep us on track; it is given to instill hope in our hearts by encouraging us to keep moving toward that New Jerusalem and that new Massachusetts and that new Worcester County. We are meant to imagine that great cloud of witnesses who have gone before us down through the ages cheering us on: Peter and Paul and Thomas and Mary Magdalene and Martha and Mary; Justin and Clement and Agnes

and Irenaeus and Jerome and Augustine; Benedict and Dominic and Francis and Clare and Julian and Catherine and Columba and Cranmer and Luther and Calvin and Ignatius—right down to this present day.

So we gather here today, the living and the dead. There is nothing creepy about that; it's simply a gift from the living God and a tenet of our faith that when we die life is changed, not ended. So those saints who shaped this congregation are also here with us: Paul and Charlie and David and Margaret and Midge and Wynn and Wyla and Jeanne and Roger and Janet and so many others including those whose faith is known to God alone. And those remembered on this day by each of us: those named who have died this past year, those who have shaped our faith. I always think of my dad on this day who died before he ever had the chance to meet my wife or kids. And Katharine Bates, who was one of my first Sunday School teachers and Nelson Thayer who was a priest who helped me to navigate the journey into the Episcopal Church.

Each of you have your own saints, “for they lived not only in ages past, there are hundreds of thousands still. The world is filled with the saints of God and you can meet them at work or at school or at play and even over tea (or a cup of coffee or a single malt scotch, neat.)

This Feast Day is a wonderful celebration of what the Celtic mystics sometimes call a “thin place”—that place where the gap between the living and the dead feels smaller. The ghosts and goblins of our All Hallows Eve celebrations remind us that across cultural lines and through the centuries there has been a recognition that these days are an opportunity to ponder the great mysteries of life and death by remembering the ancestors who have gone before us and giving thanks for their lives and their witness. *We feebly struggle while they in glory shine; yet all are one in thee, for all are thine. Alleluia! Alleluia!*

We gather for Holy Eucharist and come to the Table where the good news of the resurrection is celebrated and the risen Christ is our host, and like John I think if we close our eyes we too can almost see those saints who have gone marching in, those white robed martyrs encouraging us in our journeys. They are present with us and that instills hope because we know how the story ends. Not the details of course. The Book of Revelation isn't some secret code that needs to be broken so we can be sure to be ready for Christ's return on January 4, 2010 or October 16, 2020. It is a vision given so that we might not lose heart, a vision given so that we can become more faithful and courageous disciples in this time and place, by bearing witness to the new creation that God is bringing about. Above all else we are meant to remember that nothing can separate us from the love of God made known to us in Jesus Christ—not even death.

The Book of Revelation and this Feast of All Saints are given to the Church so that we will not be so fearful. This vision is given as a gift that allows us to peak at the end of the story so that we will be less afraid to live these days with courage and boldness. Those white-robed martyrs know the costs to discipleship—and some of them paid with their lives for making the claim that Jesus is Lord. But now they sing because what else do you do in the presence of God but feel true joy? If you listen closely you can hear them singing with the angels and archangels, a heavenly chorus:

Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever!

It doesn't really matter much if you can carry a tune or not. You are invited to join in the singing. The saints and the real singers will carry it for us in the same way it happens at a rock concert where everyone is singing along and everyone knows every word and you just can't help yourself: you just *have to* sing at the top of your lungs and it's ok because it is the song that matters, and being part of that song—part of that great multicultural cloud of witnesses.

That is the Church and that is what the Church is for: not a collection of individuals, each of whom stands alone, but a Body with many members stretching through time and around the planet. We need each other to sing those rich, complex harmonies that God so adores. We need each other to do justice and love mercy and walk humbly with God; we need each other because sometimes when life is scary you need to hold on tight to someone's hand to make it through.

A friend of mine says that the journey of faith is about moving from guest to host. I like that. Here at St. Francis we are trying to create a community that has the marks of that larger holy, catholic, and apostolic faith that has been passed down through the ages. On any given week there are people who come here for the first time, or maybe the sixth time but they still feel new, still feel unsure. It is our job as a congregation to extend a welcome and to offer hospitality: to help someone trying to balance that blue book and that red book to find their place; or to invite someone to stay for coffee. But the goal as a great Eucharistic hymn puts it is for strangers to become friends. We invite our guests to take the risk of becoming hosts—because that is what the Church is for.

We are on a journey together, toward that vision John has of a great multitude that no one can count from every language and tribe and people and nation. And our work here is to get used to the fact that everyone in the Kingdom of God doesn't look like us or speak the same language or sing the same songs or agree with our politics. Our job, as the Church, begins with the practice of hospitality and openness and love until we start to get it right, so that when we find ourselves among that cloud of witnesses we won't be too surprised by the richness of it all.

As we celebrate Holy Baptism this weekend it is our work to become as faithful in our own generation as they were in theirs. It is our job to become "saints" for these young people being baptized this weekend. It is our job to extend a welcome to them as children—so that they can begin that journey from guest to host. Baptism isn't a fire insurance policy. It isn't something we do out of fear; but an outward and visible sign of what we do out of love. Because if you blink a couple of times you'll be able to see in the thin place of this day that it isn't going to be very long before Allison and Adeline and Jacob are being confirmed or married or baptizing their own children or grandchildren—perhaps in this very place or perhaps in one like it half-way around the world.

We need the Church—not to be an institution that perpetuates itself but to be a living Body with many members that is moving toward God's new creation. We live between the Garden of Eden and the New Jerusalem coming down from heaven: in the midst of extraordinary challenges globally, nationally, and locally. But we face those challenges with an eye toward God's new creation and with the hope of one day seeing that reality come to fruition. Amen.