

All Saints Sunday A 2020

Revelation 7:9-17

Psalm 34:1-10, 22

1 John 3:1-3

Matthew 5:1-12

Are you sitting down?  
What I have to say may not seem astonishing.  
But that, I think, is because we can't fully comprehend it.  
Believe me that I absolutely trust it is true,  
Even on the days when I doubt.  
I consider it the foundation of life,  
Even in the moments when I don't experience it.

I have few facts to back me up,  
But I know this is true:  
No matter what happens today, or tomorrow,  
No matter what happens on Election Day,  
Or the day after that,  
Or the week after that,  
Or in the months and years to come,  
No matter what,  
God is and will always be God.

And the God who is,  
Will always be blessing us,  
Holding us within the divine breath  
That inspires the world,  
Promising us a future with hope.

Jesus sat down to say this,  
At the beginning of his teaching ministry.

Whenever Jesus sits down,  
And begins to speak,  
Or, in the old phrase,  
Opens his mouth, and teaches,  
It's a moment for us to sit up and take notice.

When Jesus sits down and begins to speak,  
We're supposed to pay attention,  
Because this is not a casual detail.  
It signifies something of ultimate importance.  
Sitting down to teach  
Is a sign that the words have power.

Just as God at the beginning  
spoke a good world into being,  
So Jesus at the beginning of his ministry  
Speaks the good news into being.  
Blessing is the essence of life,  
The truth that is unquenchable,  
Even if invisible.

The beatitudes are not a promise,  
Or a vision,  
They are a revelation of ultimate truth.

It's a radical revisioning,  
A new understanding of life in our beautiful broken world,  
A new understanding of our life  
with the God  
who is as invisible, and as essential,  
as our breath.

No matter how we behave,  
No matter what our circumstances,  
No matter what we think,  
Even if we are drowned by our feelings  
Or weighed down by events  
Or standing at the edge of despair,  
God is showering blessing on us,  
And will do so forever.

Blessing is not only for the strong,  
Or successful,  
Or beautiful, or brave.  
Or even the good.  
Blessing is for all the children of God,  
Every living thing on the earth.  
The blessing of this truth can live within us,  
Whatever shows on the outside.

This wasn't always the case,  
Or at least,  
We didn't always understand it.  
We used to think there were conditions  
To God's love.  
It may still be hard, sometimes,  
To trust,  
But the truth is, blessings always flow.  
When Jesus proclaimed this

From his seat on the mountain,  
He turned his world upside down,  
And opened a way for all of us.

In the time of Jesus  
A piece of tradition persisted,  
A claim that blessings were offered by God  
To those who were obedient,  
Who did no wrong.

There's a passage in the second law of Moses  
Where the abundance of blessing,  
For those who can keep the commandments,  
Is offered in beautiful detail.

*[If you obey the commandments]Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the field. Blessed shall be the fruit of your womb, the fruit of your ground, and the fruit of your livestock, both the increase of your cattle and the issue of your flock. Blessed shall be your basket and your kneading-bowl. Blessed shall you be when you come in, and blessed shall you be when you go out... The LORD will open for you his rich storehouse, the heavens, to give the rain of your land in its season and to bless all your undertakings. \**

All these blessings –  
And they are concrete, material blessings,  
Of fine weather and food and shelter  
and generations to come –  
All these blessings come to those who obey  
And can observe the commandments.

On the other hand,  
The curses on those who stray  
Are so terrible that even now,  
Those who observe Jewish tradition  
Typically read the list of curses,  
When it comes up in public worship,  
At breakneck speed and in a whisper,  
Lest the terror overtake the hearers.

Jesus knew the world was dark.  
No one has experienced the bitterness  
And disappointment of human life  
More profoundly than he.  
He was not naïve;  
In fact he was more clear-sighted about human failure  
Than any of us.

And he knew how to curse.

But his teaching was radically new,  
Because he separated blessing and curse  
From our shortcomings and sufferings.  
He let us know that blessing is always there,  
Hidden, yet powerful.  
Blessings of mercy, welcome,  
Comfort, abundance of hope.  
Nothing can take these blessings away.

The saints are those who live in this truth,  
Even when it seems almost impossible.  
The saints are those who trust that the blessing  
Is undimmed and undiminished by suffering,  
And that it will shine forth for all to see.  
The revealing of the blessing may take a long time –  
it may seem too long.  
It may be hidden,  
Scorned, trampled, and abused.  
But never stamped out.  
Nothing can stop God's blessing from flowing.

There's a beautiful story  
That comes from the darkest depths of human experience.  
In Auschwitz,  
Faced with the absolute evil of the concentration camps,  
A group of faithful Jews brought God to trial.  
How could the God of covenant faithfulness  
Allow the beloved people to be massacred? \*\*

Elie Wiesel tells this story.  
For days and all night long until the morning,  
They argued their case against God.  
And finally, they found God guilty  
Of crimes against creation and humankind.

After that,  
There came a profound silence,  
An "infinity of silence."

After which, one of the rabbis said,  
It is time for evening prayers.

And so they began the prayers of the faithful,  
Which include the blessing

Of the God of all blessings.  
The merciful,  
The almighty,  
Bestower of wisdom,  
Light of the faithful...  
They prayed as they had always prayed.

These are the saints.  
Those who doubt,  
Accuse,  
Wear out the nights with lamentation,  
And still proclaim the blessing of God.

This is the work of the saints.  
They see the pain and sorrow,  
The cruelty and injustice of the world,  
And hold fast the truth that no matter what,  
God is still God,  
And the essence of God is to bless,  
To bless all creation,  
To bless the future,  
To bless the infinite mystery  
In ways we cannot yet imagine.

Holding this truth,  
There is nothing the saints cannot endure.  
The saints endure, withstand,  
Maintain hope,  
Actively imagine the renewal of all things.

The meek in a time when it seems only force prevails,  
The merciful in a time when vengeance is preferred,  
The pure in heart in a time when no motives are unmixed,  
All these saints are blessed beyond measure.  
The earth is theirs,  
Mercy is theirs,  
And they see God.

This is the work of the saints.  
They reach out their hands,  
Across time and space,  
Inviting us, urging us  
To join their company.

No matter what happens,  
No matter how impenetrable the darkness may grow,

No matter how hard the work may become,  
No matter whether we question the wisdom  
Or the power  
Or even the existence of God,  
God will still be God,  
And will continue to bless us.

So – do we have it in us  
To be the saints?

Whatever the outcome of the election,  
The days ahead will call for sainthood.  
Faithful action,  
Abiding commitment,  
Steady courage,  
And – though Jesus didn't say this on the mountainside –  
A sense of humor.

And above all,  
Hearts that do not fail,  
Hope that does not wane.

The saints need to spring into action now,  
Because no matter what the outcome of the election,  
it is all too clear  
That there is work to do,  
Work that will last the rest of our lives,  
And for generations to come.  
Work to bring the inner blessings  
Of the beatitudes,  
Which never fail,  
To reality in justice for all,  
Comfort for all,  
Preservation of an earth  
For those who come after to inherit.

We are called to be those saints,  
Here and now.  
Confident in the blessings that flow,  
Clear about the work to bring the blessings  
Out into the world.

We are inheritors of the wisdom,  
And the work,  
Of the saints who have gone before.  
No matter what happens,

The blessing is ours now,  
To treasure and to share.  
Today, tomorrow,  
And in all the days to come.

\*Deuteronomy 28

\*\*Elie Wiesel, *The Trial of God*, and Robert McAfee Brown, introduction.