The Radiance of the Saints

Revelation 7:9-17
Psalm 34:1-10, 22
1 John 3:1-3
Matthew 5:1-12

Every Sunday I get to see something most of you don't. Just before we begin the first prayer, I see your faces. Some of you start the liturgy with the news cycle written across your foreheads. Some of you carry a hospital waiting room, or a strained marriage, or a bank statement. And then something, sometimes, happens. Not every week, and certainly not for every person, but often enough that I've marked the pattern: somewhere between that first prayer and the dismissal, a face changes. Not into a smile. Into something more like light. Today is All Saints' Day, and I'd like to suggest that this is what the church means by a *saint*: people who are becoming what they behold.

The Episcopal Church keeps a calendar called Lesser Feasts and Fasts, and on it is reflected a wild blend of people we venerate throughout the year. Each day memorializes a different saint. It reaches all the way back to the first century and forward to today. There are Orthodox saints, medieval Catholics, Anglicans, even a few Episcopalians. This week alone it remembers a king, a group of men martyred for their missionary work in Africa, and a monastic woman who left her vows, fell into prostitution, and then came back. In the Roman Catholic tradition, sainthood requires documented miracles and an exemplary life. Episcopalians take a more practical view of grace and redemption reflected in those on our lectionary cycle. I love that calendar because it reminds me every week that God's work through human beings is always surprising, always miraculous even when it looks mundane, and always pointing to a reality we can't see with ordinary eyes.

Ordinary eyes are exactly what the book of Revelation is about. The title "Revelation" comes from the Greek *apokálypsis*, and it means *unveiling*. It isn't a coded timetable for

the end of the world. It is a way of seeing what everyday perception can't show us: the deeper reality behind what human eyes register as history, suffering, power, and God's purposes. Apocalyptic literature is meant to unveil for us what we might not otherwise see. John writes to Christians living under Rome, where everything visible told them that empire was ultimate. Then he pulls back the curtain showing multitude no one can count, from every nation, tribe, people, and language, standing before the throne. And at the center of that throne, what is the image of power? A Lamb. A slain Lamb. A slain Lamb who is their shepherd.

Friends, that is upside down. This vision challenges our assumption that domination is the only effective form of power. If Rome is not ultimate, Christians owe Rome no ultimate allegiance. And if the **Lamb's way** is the way of **God's** victory, the church cannot borrow the world's methods of domination and call it faithfulness. That is true of every empire and every movement, and it is uncomfortable no matter how we think governance ought to look. But notice that this vision is not meant to make us passive. It gives people who live in a world, whose most powerful institutions insist there is no alternative but complacency, the courage to live differently…. according to a different ultimate reality.

And notice the faces in that multitude. They have "come out of the great ordeal." They are not radiant because they never knew grief. They are radiant because their lives are held in a love that grief could not ultimately extinguish. God wipes away real tears that come from real grief.

John's first letter takes Revelation's vision and makes it practical. "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that **is** what we are." Then he gets really honest: "what we will be has not yet been revealed." He doesn't pretend to know. But he knows the direction: "when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is." Follow the sequence. God's love is revealed, so we recognize

who we are. We see God as God is, and so we become like the one we see. Being loved makes us love, which makes us into the image of God's own self, into love.

That idea has deep roots in Christian spirituality. Contemplation is not just thinking about God. It is being formed by relationship with God. It is not manufacturing a holy appearance. It is being drawn into the life and character of the one we love most. So … what happens to our faces, our lives, and our relationships when we begin to live from the truth that we are already beloved children of God?

The Psalmist would say: look. "Look to him and be radiant." The Hebrew word radiant means to shine, to experience joy, to become joy. The Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, the Septuagint, uses the verb *phōtizō*: to give light, to illuminate. *Draw near to God and be enlightened.* … According to its title, this psalm was written by David who was on the run. When David writes this, he is pretending to be insane so a foreign king would let him live. This is not a poem from comfort and ease. David's troubles haven't changed. What has changed is David's relationship to the trouble, because he has turned toward something that lets him see past his troubles.

Then Jesus sits down on the mountain and says the most startling things. The word we translate "blessed" literally means fortunate, or flourishing. Jesus is not telling the poor in spirit and the grieving to feel better about their circumstances. He is announcing their actual standing in God's kingdom. Their present circumstances do not tell the whole truth about their lives. The prophets who came before were persecuted for living this vision, and they are **now** experiencing fully what Jesus promised. But we don't have to die to begin living according to that reality. The pure in heart see God now, which means they see past what is immediately in front of them. Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness **are** filled at a table, by Christ's own life, so that we can feed others.

So here is the question this day, All Saints Day, puts to every one of us. Our faces are reflecting something. Do they reflect our circumstances? The news cycle? Our political party's election hopes or fears? Or do our faces reflect an eternal, apocalyptic, reality beyond the veil? Anxiety wears many political colors, and so does contempt. And lest the comfortable among us feel off the hook, being comfortable or somehow insulated from pain, is not the same things as radiance. Real radiance has grief in it. There is a difference.

Radiance may not look like a hallowed glow. It may be what another person encounters when they encounter us: patience in a long line, a meal left on a porch, a gentle response when inconvenienced, a steadiness that doesn't make sense given the week's trials. The saints are people whose lives were shaped by seeing something true about God, and whose lives then made that truth visible to the world.

So what do we see? What practices do we keep that put us in a position to see beyond this world's troubles? Prayer, Scripture, contemplation, this table, the company of one another? And how do we help each other understand our suffering and our future inside God's larger reality, instead of leaving each other alone with our griefs?

Because here is the good news. The Lamb at the center of the throne is also our Shepherd. Christ will guide us to springs of living water. The hunger may be real, the tears are really shed, and the ones who stand before the throne have wept them. But we hold the promise with the saints, that all our tears will be wiped away.

In a few minutes we will do what the church has always done. We will sing with angels and archangels and all the unseen company of heaven. The saints, that great cloud of witnesses, are not far off. They are leaning in. When they look at this table, they see what we can only imagine. And they are eager to join us in our songs of hopeful praise. So come to the table and look.

May we be a people who look intently enough to be changed.