

All Saints Weekend (RCL/B): "First Things & Final Things"
Isaiah 25:6-9, Rev. 21:1-6a, John 11:32-44
November 2-3, 2024
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

I know that Pastor Mark & I are in good company here with others who stood in line to vote this past week. The line at Spring Lake Heights Community Center last Monday stretched all the way to the back of the building. Despite the political divisions around and among us, people were streaming to vote a full week before Election Day. It reminds me of the patriotism that surged after 9/11. Those of us old enough to remember the rancor in our country during the Vietnam War are especially grateful for peaceful displays of patriotism wherever they occur.

I'm not aware of people in my fairly large circle of church friends and assorted acquaintances who aren't at least a little on edge about Election Day and potentially the days, weeks, months after it. So it was a special blessing to gather in Fellowship Hall this past Wednesday evening for Prayer Around the Cross/Prayer for the Healing of the Nations. We didn't pray just for our United States of America. We prayed for many nations, by name, in a beautiful litany Vicki sang as Ned accompanied on the piano: nations in Europe, nations in Africa, nations in Asia, islands around the globe, countries in North and South America. One song phrase commends Israel and Palestine into God's care; the combination of candlelight, song, the gift of a faith community, and the dire need of God's children in the Mideast, in Ukraine, Sudan, in our own country, in so many places, brought tears to my eyes. "For the healing of the nations, we pray to you, O God," was our refrain. "For the healing of the nations," including our own. One grateful worshiper shared the next day how meaningful the evening had been, adding, "I didn't think about politics." We were

living on a higher plane, praying in a greater context, opening the door to the peace that passes understanding, a gift only the Holy Spirit can give. *“Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you, not as the world gives.....”* (John 14:27)

It’s All Saints Weekend, and our Scripture talks a lot about death **and** resurrection. (This is why we frequently hear these lessons at funerals.) From Isaiah:

*...he will swallow up death forever.
Then the Lord GOD will wipe away the tears from all faces....* (Isa. 25:8a-b)

From Revelation:

*...God himself will be with them;
He 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.* (Rev. 21:3-4)

Revelation reminds us that whatever we are experiencing in the moment is “the first things,” not the final state of affairs, whether it’s our own or a loved one’s illness, grief over someone’s death, anxiety over the election, compassion so deep it hurts for those who suffer, close to home or all around the globe. Whatever we are experiencing in the moment is “the first things,” not the final things.

In this passage Jesus also says, *“See, I am making all things new.”* (Rev. 21:5b) It sure didn’t look like it to those who were the first ones to hear the Book of Revelation! They were living through a terrible persecution, and some of them weren’t even making it out alive; many of them were being martyred. Things didn’t look bright and new; they looked bloody and scary. That’s why they needed to be reminded that they weren’t alone in the midst of their trials: *“See, the home of God is among mortals.”* (Rev. 21:3b) They needed to be reminded that God was in the midst of them and that God is faithful to keeping God’s eternal promises, even when earthly prospects look bleak. **We** need to be reminded that

we are not alone in the midst of our trials either. **We** need to be reminded that God is in the midst of **us** and that God is faithful to keeping God's eternal promises, even when our earthly prospects look bleak.

We don't often hear clips from the Book of Revelation because it's so hard to understand. It's "apocalyptic" literature, which means the meaning is literally "veiled." It's written in code language so that if the persecutors picked it up they wouldn't know it was talking about them as the aggressors. John of Patmos, who is receiving the gift of this revelation, quotes a voice from heaven saying:

*"See, the home of God is among mortals.
He will dwell with them...
...God himself will be with them."*

We believe God is **already** with us. Our Lord Jesus **is** Emmanuel, "God with us"! He tells us, *"Do not be afraid; I have overcome the world." "...[T]ake courage; I have conquered the world!"* (John 16:33)

Not that He tells us to withdraw from the world. Quite the contrary, our Lord tells us to be the Good Samaritan and tend to those wounded on the roadside. He tells us to be the Good Shepherd and seek out the lost sheep. He tells us to feed the hungry and shelter the homeless and clothe the naked and visit the sick and imprisoned. Ours is a faith to be lived out **in** the world, as a part **of** the world, not apart **from** the world. We're able to confront suffering, hunger, illness, death, injustice head on, because we realize these are the **first** things, not the **last** things. Although we often can't glimpse it, except with the eyes of faith, the kingdom of God is coming, among us, within us, sometimes **through** us, by God's grace.

This Sunday, November 3, is the day on the church calendar when we celebrate and thank God for Martin de Porres, whom we remember as a renewer of society. A renewer of society is someone who makes the world a better place because of Christlike care for the poor, the hungry, the sick, the outcasts of society, and for the creation itself. Martin was born in the 16th century, the illegitimate son of a Spanish knight and either a Negro or indigenous woman who was a freed slave. As such he was a mulatto, and stood on a very low rung of the social ladder in Lima, Peru. Although he lived a holy, humble, compassionate, life-giving life, and is compared to Francis of Assisi, who was canonized just 2 years after his death, it took about 400 years for Martin to be formally named a saint. He is the patron saint of interracial harmony, not just because he was of mixed race (which may explain why the church was so slow to acknowledge his exceptional holiness), but because he tenderly ministered to people of **all** races who came to the Dominican friary where he was a lay brother and an infirmarian, a healer. (Martin was trained by his mother Ana Velazquez in the healing uses of herbs, and had served an apprenticeship with a barber-surgeon.)

His compassion extended to **all** God's creatures, so he is also the patron saint of animal shelters. He opened a clinic for abandoned cats and dogs in his sister's house. (One biographer I read said his sister probably deserved a halo, too!¹) He was even protective of vermin, the mice and rats who nibbled on the beautiful ecclesiastical vestments. He basically argued to his brothers who wanted to exterminate them, "They've got to eat, too," despite the fact that they were getting 3 squares by invading the friary's granary!

Martin de Porres, who had been abandoned by his own father and raised by his single mother, founded both an orphanage and a hospital. He turned the pain he had

experienced into a blessing for others. He could have become embittered and cynical, but he became compassionate and hope-filled, marveling at the suffering love of Jesus, in turn wanting to serve His Savior in the last, the lost and the least.

The final Scripture lesson this All Saints weekend is the raising of Lazarus by the One who proclaimed, *"I am the resurrection and the life."* (John 11:25) We all know a person or persons who have stopped believing in God or who have stopped communicating with or worshiping God because things have happened that they don't believe God **would** have or **should** have allowed. They believe God is apathetic, or powerless, or dead. This Gospel tells the lie to that. Jesus is profoundly moved, greatly disturbed, even deeply angered by Lazarus' death (John 11:33, 38). "A groan was wrung from Jesus' inner being."²

But Lazarus' death, which made Jesus weep, was the **first** thing, not the **final** thing. In the crowning sign of all the signs, all the faith-instilling miracles of the Fourth Gospel, Jesus calls Lazarus out of the tomb back into life. That's not the final thing either, though – that has to await the resurrection of **all** the dead from a death that will be done forever, a death that will never stalk again.

Jesus' command is, *"Unbind him, let him go."* (John 11:44) We pray, "Unbind **us**, Lord, let **us** go, unwind the grave clothes of anxiety and fear that blind us to Your power to save. Free us to believe that whatever we experience now are the **first** things, not the **final** things. Reinforce our faith that You are indeed the Alpha, the Omega, and everything in between, God-with-us, today and forever. Amen"

¹Phyllis McGinley, *Saint-Watching* (NY: Crossroad, 1988), p. 71.

²William Barclay, *The Gospel of John*, Vol. 2, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977), p. 98