

Sermon 11/3/24: Isaiah 25:4–9

All Saints Sunday

“All Saints, All Souls, All Peoples”

*You have been a refuge for the poor,  
a refuge for the needy in distress,  
a hiding place from the storm,  
a shade from the heat.*

*When the breath of tyrants is like a winter storm*

5 *or like heat in the desert,  
you subdue the roar of foreigners.*

*Like heat shaded by a cloud,  
the tyrants’ song falls silent.*

6 *On this mountain,*

*the Lord of heavenly forces will prepare for all peoples  
a rich feast, a feast of choice wines,  
of select foods rich in flavor,  
of choice wines well refined.*

7 *He will swallow up on this mountain the veil that is veiling all peoples,  
the shroud enshrouding all nations.*

8 *He will swallow up death forever.*

*The Lord God will wipe tears from every face;*

*he will remove his people’s disgrace from off the whole earth,  
for the Lord has spoken.*

9 *They will say on that day,*

*“Look! This is our God,  
for whom we have waited—  
and he has saved us!*

*This is the Lord, for whom we have waited;*

*let’s be glad and rejoice in his salvation!” (CEB)*

My mother’s family is Catholic, several proud generations’ worth adhering to the one true faith, and one side effect of this is that there has always been the accoutrement of saints cluttering at the edges of daily life. Whenever I couldn’t find a book or my class notes or my mother’s keys, my aunt would advise me to beseech St. Anthony of Padua, patron saint of lost things: “Tony, Tony, come around; something’s lost and can’t be found.” Evidence is still inconclusive as to whether Anthony is accepting enough of being called “Tony” to come help me find my item.

When my siblings and I took to leaving on all sorts of adventures as we grew older, a St. Christopher statue—patron saint of travelers—arrived in the front garden to keep watch over the rhododendrons and us alike. When my stepfather converted to Catholicism, he took to wearing a medal of St. Michael the Archangel, patron saint of police officers. Until my grandfather died, a small figurine of St. Joseph—patron saint of fathers and families, among other things—stood on his bedside table with his watch and rosary. The great cloud of witnesses had very specific names growing up in that world, and it was as familiar to me to have St. Mary of Magdala’s eyes follow me across a sanctuary as Christ’s.

It was always an understood part of the conversation that there were people who were saints, who were useful and involved in our daily lives, and there were those who were decidedly not. The most common categorical opposition is “sinners,” in a “sheep and goats” sort of way that allows for neat separation as though Paul hasn’t declared us all to be sinners, as though every saint doesn’t have some shadow whether or not we’ve recorded it. Oddly and conveniently enough, the sinners of my world were quite often such not because they didn’t have holy enough bones or their names on a registry but because they disagreed with my grandfather, or the priest, or me.

On joining The United Methodist Church as an adult, I realized we don’t really weigh in on saints in the same way. Following our Protestant heritage, Methodist doctrine is uncomfortable with there being any sort of intercession between us and God—which is a primary use of the saints, like poor Tony—but Methodists also greatly dislike the notion that there can be some people who are in any way more divine than others (besides Jesus, of course). Officially, “John Wesley believed we have much to learn from the saints, but he did not encourage anyone to worship them. He expressed concern about the Church of England’s focus on saints’ days and said that ‘most of the holy days were at present

answering no valuable end.’ Wesley’s focus was entirely on the saving grace of Jesus Christ.”<sup>1</sup>

So why bother to recognize All Saints’ Day if we don’t really recognize saints? It’s a bit of a misnomer, since what we commemorate is actually closer to the Catholic holy day of *All Souls’ Day*, or the day in which all those of the faith who have died are remembered. For us Methodists, they’re one and the same; the UMC states that, “United Methodists call people ‘saints’ because they exemplified the Christian life. In this sense, every Christian can be considered a saint.”<sup>2</sup>

Sinners are thus not in opposition to saints but are the saints themselves because we are them and they are us, the names earned daily by our choices about our reception of God’s grace and our drawing near to God’s perfection. We do not get to draw the neat lines between the accepted and venerated saints and the forgotten—yet we still do. It is human nature to pay attention to the people important to us, and it is a good and holy thing that we gather on this first weekend of November to remember the ones we have loved and lost. Generations of us have done the same, grieving the separation of death even while we proclaim the hope of resurrection, and if we only light candles for the people we know, if we only ring bells for those who can fit in the slideshow, well. Those are our saints.

It is such a very irksome God thing that this lectionary reading from Isaiah invites us to think that maybe All Souls means more than all the souls from our own community, the ones we have learned to love and respect—that maybe All Souls means, in fact, *all* souls.

“On this mountain, / the Lord of heavenly forces will prepare for all peoples / a rich feast,” writes Isaiah. We have to back up a bit to see why it matters that the

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<sup>1</sup> [Do United Methodists believe in saints? | UMC.org](https://www.umc.org/faith-life/saints)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.; to be fair, the RCC also considers every Christian to be called to be a saint, but there are stratifications on how well that’s achieved ([Saints | USCCB](https://www.usccb.org/saints))

feast has so many attendees; the prophet writing under the name Isaiah lived during the latter part of the 700s BC, during the time of the Assyrian invasion of Israel.<sup>3</sup> This is the first real external loss since David settled into Jerusalem some 250 years earlier<sup>4</sup> and it rocks Israel to the core, spurring several different prophets' worth of anger and grief at the loss of their autonomy and culture as well as the human devastation of war. The chapters just before our reading today speak of Isaiah's anger at the "foreigners," continued here in the relish of the idea of a God Who "subdue[s] the roar of foreigners" and makes the "tyrants' song" fall silent. On this day in November, we don't have to think very hard to remember the language of tyrants and foreigners on our own lips, the prayers we have sent in our line drawing between sinners and saints, the ways we feel anger and grief and loss as we remember the people we have loved and continue to navigate a world of people we, perhaps, don't.

"On this mountain, / the Lord of heavenly forces will prepare for all peoples / a rich feast," says Isaiah. Rev. Bryan Findlayson writes that, "This poem speaks of the final day of salvation and makes a number of points which, for the people in Isaiah's day, would be regarded as quite revolutionary. In the coming day, the nations will gather as one people in Jerusalem. It will be a time of fellowship, of feasting, a time of great joy for all peoples and not just the descendants of Abraham."<sup>5</sup>

A time of great joy, of feasting, of hope and connection for *all peoples*—for the saints we can name and the ones we'd rather not, the sinners we don't even want to think of as saints, the ones we don't even know about in far-flung countries and in the city next door. Isaiah's vision of the mountain refuses the ways even his

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<sup>3</sup> [First Isaiah → Historical Context – Study Guide - Yale Bible Study](#); the Assyrian invasion is agreed to be around 732 BCE.

<sup>4</sup> [Timeline of Ancient Israelite Religion\(2000-539 BCE\)](#)

<sup>5</sup> [Sunday 28A, Proper 23A. Old Testament](#)

culture said that some weren't welcome, and said that only when all nations are gathering in the name of the Lord will sorrow cease. "The Lord God will wipe tears from every face; he will remove his people's disgrace from off the whole earth, for the Lord has spoken." The idea of wiping away tears is far more often pulled from the images of New Jerusalem in Revelation but that image comes from here, comes from the ruins of a nation in which the possibilities of healing are stronger than the grief of current separation and loss.

Yet even this is counteracted; even this has Isaiah's humanity. You see, the verse after these says that Moabites still won't be welcome—because they chose not to come, says Isaiah, but we who understand that the Scriptures are divinely inspired but humanly written understand that the idea of *all nations* is terrifying. What if some of the saints are the people I don't think are saintly at all? What if the mountain has the people I love and the people I really, really don't and the people I never knew at all?

What if? God says *absolutely*; the only entry fee is understanding that God invites those who come in peace, *shalom*, in recognition that there shall be no more hatred and cruelty, that there shall be no division and prejudice. All nations come to the feast—and God has one of God's own.

"He will swallow up on this mountain the veil that is veiling all peoples, / the shroud enshrouding all nations. / He will swallow up death forever." This is why we celebrate All Saints' the way we do, as All Souls; this is why we step into the current every year of grief and sorrow and say *we remember*: because death does not care whether we are saints or sinners, whether our name is invoked in prayer for lost things or our name is forgotten along with us. Death has no respect for political boundary lines or sacred texts or worship opinions or funeral arrangements; death does not make rules about whether you are white enough, or straight enough, or rich enough, or Christian enough, not in the way of God's

restoration to wholeness but in the apathy that we have anything to make whole at all. Death has no care for the measurements we put in place but approaches us all with the deep fear of our own mortality, lapping up the tears of grief as the great leveler it is.

And God *feasts on it*.

While the people on the mountain are treated to rich wines and sumptuous meats, God eats the very shroud of death, swallowing it *forever*. There's a lot of really cool subtext happening here around the gods of the time and the image of Sheol and Mot that I can absolutely geek out at you about later if you'd like, but the point Isaiah is making is that the great leveler gets leveled; on the mountain where God wipes away tears and all nations feast together, we no longer delineate between sinner and saint, between ours and other, but only recognize that we have responded to God with our tentative or resounding *yes*. "Look, this is our God!" Look, people who grieve, people who have lost, people who have drawn a thousand barriers between each other; look at how God has made us equals, has truly overridden our presuppositions and our violence, has given us fine wine, has invited us all to the mountain, sinners and saints, and torn to shreds the death that we so often use as a threat against each other. God has invited us to be the light that shines just as the candles we often light for the saints we recognize and love, burning the shadow away with full knowledge that there is so much we don't yet see, that the mountain will have so many we did not expect.

"This is the God for Whom we have waited," writes Isaiah, but before that there are so many ways God is present: "You *have been* a refuge for the poor," the poet writes, "a refuge for the needy in distress, a hiding place from the storm, a shade from the heat." This is God already at work, God already sheltering God's people, God not waiting for saints or angels or the end of the world but providing refuge *now*, creating shade *now*, protecting those in the storm *now*. This is the God

Who knows that death is a future meal, that tears are not forever, that no matter how many All Saints' services we hold and bell tones ring throughout the years, we are always invited to the mountain and loved. This is the God Who knows that death is a present reality and tears choke our throats when we think of facing the first Thanksgiving, Christmas, birthdays without our loved ones, that no amount of future wine can dull the pain of present grief—and this is the God Who invites us to speak the names of our people and miss them horribly. This is the God Who is waiting *for us*, Who invites us to the Kingdom *now*, Who is building shade and respite *now*, Who calls us to always see that grace is so much bigger and saints are so much more unexpected and the whole concept of a feast so much weirder than we ever thought.

All Saints', in the pattern of this and many other Methodist churches, always falls on a day we celebrate communion. It's not an accident; here, too, is a feast on a mountain where all are invited, and while we have neither fine wine nor rich foods at our particular table, we do have Christ's words that there are none barred from this sacred act. Saint James and sinner Judas alike came to the table and were fed; death came and was defeated; there was refuge for the poor and shade from the heat in a life and death and resurrection anchored in a meal between friends. This is the meal of all nations; this is the grief of all that is lost, and the adamant hope that such loss is not forever; this is the act of faith that there is and will be this God Who grieves with us and promises us that the deaths we hand each other are not the end. We are called to the table to be flabbergasted once again by the absolutely beautiful mess of grace that says all are welcome, sinners and saints, every nation shining in love's unending Light. It is our choice to be part of the meal, whether at this table or on a mountain; may we have the courage to answer this call, and the faith to see that God is at work now, now, and forever. Amen.