

The Celebration of All Saints – Daniel 7:1-3,15-18, Psalm 149, Ephesians 1:11-23, Luke 6:20-31  
The Rev. Canon Joan Anthony – November 3, 2019.

When I think of the Book of Daniel, I think of Daniel in the lion's den. I also think of Shadrach, Meshack and Abednego, the three Jewish officials of the King of Babylon. These three refused to worship the idols of the King and were thrown into the fiery furnace. God delivered them and they emerged without harm. As a result, the King recognized the God of Israel as most powerful. It might even be said that it was out of this event, that Nebuchadnezzar began to have faith. In the nature of things, Nebuchadnezzar died and the Medes gained power in Babylon. Darius was the king. Daniel became a trusted administrator in the kingdom. He became the object of jealousy and others sought to bring him down. In order to do so, they urged Darius to decree a period when no prayers could be offered to anyone other than the King. Daniel continued to pray to God. As punishment he was tossed into a pit full of hungry lions. Again, no harm came of this punishment and Daniel emerged whole and unharmed. Because Daniel was faithful, Darius began to acknowledge the power of God. Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego and Daniel, Jews in a foreign land who remained faithful to the God of Israel. That faith, that steadfastness in the face of challenge encouraged the faith of powerful rulers.

Today we read of a dream that came to Daniel, a dream which troubled him greatly. He sought an interpretation of what he had been shown. The attendant, an angel of God assured him that the holy ones, the saints will receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom forever-forever and ever. The kingdom spoken of is heaven, the place where the faithful saints are in the arms of God. It is meant to be encouragement to the holy ones, to the saints, to us, that God is faithful to us in all things, blessing and adversity. It is meant to remind us that we are called to be faithful to God in good times and in challenging times. It is the reminder that the Spirit has been given to support our faith.

Today is the time we celebrate the feast of All Saints. In earlier times, there was an exclusive list of Saints, capital S. People who, in the words of a friend, spiritual celebrities. As more and more people were officially canonized and given a Day of recognition, the calendar began to become overfull. And so, the feast of All Saints was introduced to remember the "minor" saints not having their own "day". With the Reformation, the calendar of saints fell into disuse. Over time we began to recover the more scriptural idea of saints. We began to recognize that there were Saints with a capital S, and saints with a small s.

Some years ago, I had occasion to do a "children's sermon" on All Saints Day. I love doing Children's sermons because children understand theology in a straightforward, clear way. They do not make it complex but cut to the heart of the matter. On this particular day, as the children gathered around, I asked how many had older brothers and sisters. Hands went up. The conversation continued and went something like this. "Do you know that your older brothers and sisters are saints?" Shock and groans, shaking of heads and expressions of disbelief on the faces of the younger siblings and a certain smugness on the faces of their older brothers and sisters. Then I posed the question of who had younger brothers and sisters, again

hands raised. "Do you know that they are saints as well?" Again, disbelief, skepticism, even denial. How could brothers and sisters, those annoying siblings possibly be saints? Then, the punch line. Not only are our siblings saints, but we are all saints as well. The scriptural meaning of saints are those who are called by God into faithful living. Saints are not especially virtuous or holier than thou, but rather are set apart as those "marked as Christ's own forever". Whenever someone is baptized they are anointed with oil as those words are said. Marked as Christ's own forever", saints everyone.

Recently I have been pondering a question concerning this idea of being called by God into a life of faith. It is not something we can do alone. A life of faith is enabled by God through the power of the Holy Spirit and is lived out in a community of other people seeking to live faithfully. The question is who are the faithful who have nourished my faith? Who are the faithful who have nourished and continue to nourish your faith?

There are, of course the saints with a capital S, who are recognized by the Church as examples of faithful living and in some cases faithful dying. They are important to us for their witness and their example of what faithful living in the world can mean. They listened to God's voice in their life. They responded to God's call, not once but many times. I think of four who had particular qualities which made them examples of both saintliness and humanness.

I think of Hilda who was the Abbess of Whitby and who in a time when women had little power, was a voice for the Celtic understanding of spirituality. And when the Church decided to move in a different direction she accepted the discernment and decision of the majority and continued to faithfully serve God.

I think of Thomas, who after the resurrection had the courage to doubt. Thomas whose faith was his own, hard won and real. Thomas who was willing to stand out against the crowd until he could see for himself.

I think of Teresa Avilla, a founder of convents across Europe, who traveled tirelessly. On one rainy late night when her cart became mired in mud and stuck fast, she had the honesty to question God. It is said she looked up to heaven and said "God, if this is the way you treat your friends, no wonder you have so few of them."

Saints with a capital S who nourish our faith. Saints with a capital S who teach us what it means to be called to be holy ones, to be saints with a small letter s.

Who are those saints whose faith nourishes your faith? I think of my grandmother, who taught me to pray always. In the summer when I stayed with her, I would on occasion come upon her in her kitchen, kneeling on the floor against a chair, praying. She was never distracted by someone entering the room, rather she was lost in prayer as the most important thing she was about at that moment.

I think of a childhood friend, Cynthia, who went to a church much different than mine but who earnestly spoke to me of heaven. She spoke of heaven from a childish view, as a place with wonderful food, toys and streets paved with gold. I don't think of heaven that way, but

her faith encouraged me to think of heaven at all and set me on a journey of discovery. She taught me the value of witness, of talking about what we believe and why.

I think of Larry, a friend whose ministry was cut short by an early death. Larry in his dying taught me what it meant to hope in the resurrection. He was not afraid of death, he knew what awaited him in the kingdom. What Larry taught me was that when we speak of hope and our hope in the resurrection we are not speaking of wishes, but rather of the sure and certain promise of eternal life. He taught me that it is not given us to know specifics this side of death, but that what is important and sure is the promise.

All of these people, Hilda, Teresa and Thomas, saints with capital S's and Grandmother, Cynthia and Larry had faith, lived faithful and very human lives. All of these people and many more have nourished my faith because they lived faithful lives themselves and allowed me the privilege of seeing their faith. They knew that in death life is truly changed but not ended. It is this reality, this truth of eternal life that allows us to be in the midst of a great cloud of witnesses, living and beyond this life, who continue to nourish our faith.

In a few minutes, we will process to the baptismal font. Once there we will have time to remember aloud all of those in our lives who have by their life of faith, nourished our faith. In speaking names, it is appropriate to speak as you are moved, in many cases, speaking as others are speaking so that the great cloud of witnesses we name are lifted heavenward. When all have been named, we will renew our baptismal covenant, where we commit again to faithful living. Where we acknowledge again that we are gathered, healed, re-membered into a loving relationship with God and with one another, past, present and yet to come. When the crucifer moves down the aisle please join behind in process to the font.

For a few moments, I ask you to sit in silence and call to mind those in your life whose faith has nourished your faith.