

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

November 6, 2022 – ALL SAINTS' SUNDAY

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: "*Tethered to One Another in Love*"*

Daniel 7:1-3, 15-18 (Daniel sees a vision of an eternal kingdom)
Psalm 149 (Hallelujah! Sing to the Lord a new song)
Ephesians 1:11-23 (In Christ we have obtained an eternal inheritance)
St. Luke 6:20-31 (Jesus teaches the Beatitudes)

"You are not alone, and help is available." Those are the words God spoke to my heart on All Saints' Day 1987, after I had a profound encounter with the living Christ during Holy Communion. I had been raised a Christian, but this was an "Emmaus Road" experience for me. Remember, the two disciples who walked and talked with Jesus, but didn't actually *come to know* the risen Lord until the breaking of the bread? On that November 1st, Jesus unexpectedly saved my life and my soul. But I needed to know what was next. As a lonely single woman, I was greatly comforted to hear that I was not actually all by myself. And, as someone who had royally messed up my life prior to this encounter with Christ, I was hugely relieved to know help was available. Instinctively, I knew it would be real help—not the bad advice given by well-meaning friends, or the kind of "help" you're supposed to get when you call an 800 number and reach a person 8 time zones away who doesn't speak intelligible English.

I did not know then that a veritable army of helpers is available to every Christian believer! If you go online and Google "Anglican Saints," you'll get a Wikipedia entry that lists more than 100 "traditional" and "modern" saints.¹ But that list doesn't include those from the Bible, early Christianity, and other Christian traditions. Saint Paul writes in Hebrews 12:1, "we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses." But where, exactly, is that cloud, where our brothers and sisters in faith who have gone before us now reign in glory with God on high?

Recently, I was reading that theoretical physicists believe, according to "string theory," that the universe operates with 10 dimensions, whereas, with our limited senses, we are only able to perceive four.² That would certainly explain phenomena such as the risen Jesus appearing to His disciples through a locked door, then disappearing the same way; Saints Paul and John being taken up into heaven temporarily to see what was there; or Philip the Evangelist's supernatural transportation to and from the Ethiopian he met in the desert.

When it comes to the dimensionality of our universe, that includes outer space. If any of you saw the 2013 movie, "Gravity," you may remember how vital it was for the astronauts to be tethered to a secure space station as they floated off into the dark and starry vacuum. Like them, the saints in heaven need to be tethered to the security of Christ's Church—which Jesus said nothing could ever destroy.

And, just as those hoses and cables provide vital air and a means of communication to astronauts, the two-way tether from the Church on earth to the saints in heaven, gives our spirits life-sustaining nourishment and helps communicate our prayers to God. Truly, we are not alone, and help is available! But how ought we to respond to this wonderful consolation with which the Lord has blessed us?

Writing about the "great cloud of witnesses" (Heb. 12:1-2), St. Paul continues: "let us ... lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith" In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus offers us a few guidelines for how we might begin living holier lives. If we are "poor" or "hungry" we *need* things. But in this context, it means we must acknowledge our *need* for God. And if we "weep" or "are hated," we are *mourning* and *pained*, but in this context, it means we are to *grieve* our sins, and *identify with* all who are marginalized, forgotten, and despised.

We may think that only canonized saints are called to, or capable of holiness. Yet, all baptized Christians are already on that path. It is up to us whether or not we follow that road. We can neglect, fritter away, or corrupt the priceless heritage for which our brothers and sisters in faith worked, sacrificed, and at times, gave their lives.

Or, we can fulfill the faith of those who went before us, upholding and maintaining our rich and abiding tradition that is part of the wider Church, the larger Communion of Saints. As the author of Jude writes to the believers in verse 4: We are to “contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints.”

Thank God, we don’t have to walk that road alone. At every moment, we are part of a universal fellowship that makes it possible for St. Paul to add this greeting in two of his letters: “All the saints salute you!” He was addressing small groups of Christians in Philippi and Corinth, who gathered together to hear letters from their spiritual leader. Quite likely, they met in someone’s home, and among them were slaves, servants, and common working people. As a tiny group that was considered insignificant or unimportant by the commercial cities and cosmopolitan powers of the Roman Empire, they may have felt disconnected or isolated—perhaps as we do, at times, way out here in Compass. So they were no doubt comforted by these words: “All the saints salute you!” Those early Christians were not alone—and neither are we.³

For, out of every century, from around the world, and through the mysterious realm beyond the grave, there arise the voices of the saints who have finished their course in faith and who now rest from their labors. They too, send us this greeting: “All the Saints salute you!”

Think of it, we here at St. John’s are being cheered on daily by Saints Paul, Philip, and Timothy; Augustine, Athanasius, and Origen; Cyril, Methodius, and Ignatius; Francis and Clare; Teresa and Catherine; Michael and Gabriel; and our uniquely Anglican saints, among them Alban, Anselm, Columba, Cranmer, Ridley, Andrewes, Wesley, Swithun, and Boniface, who join their watchful encouragement with those dear to us, whose names are listed in our bulletin this morning.

Although they have passed from this life, they still live with God and in our hearts, to fight at our sides with “holy boldness” as the hidden allies of Christ, working to defeat the enemy of our souls. Not only do we need their help, but also, the saints need ours! For, as we read in Hebrews 11:39-40: “These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.” Here, the Bible is saying that in us, and through us, these saints will be perfected. Therefore, only if we remain faithful to Christ will their aims and vision be fully realized. Or, as we hear in the words of a hymn by Charles Wesley:

And are we yet alive, And see each other’s face? Glory and thanks to Jesus give, For His almighty grace. What troubles have we seen, What mighty conflicts past, Fighting without and fears within, Since we assembled last! Yet out of all the Lord Hath brought us by His love; And still He doth His help afford And hides our life above.⁴

Tethered to those who have gone on before us, together we are part of the tie that binds, the fellowship of kindred minds, one with our hopes, our aims, our fears, our cares. As such, it is the saints who show us from afar how to run with perseverance the race that is set before us. And with God’s help, we, too, will cross the finish line and claim the prize that Christ has reserved for us.

So let us continue to joyfully carry on the work of all the saints—whether in the Church universal, or alongside those faithful Episcopalians who, since 1729, have laid the foundation for our life here at St. John’s. Let us go forward into the new Church year that soon approaches, faithful, true, and bold, inspired by the teachings of Christ; energized by the salutes from all the saints; encouraged and equipped by the grace of God; and filled with the love of Jesus Christ and the blessings and fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

And finally, as we join together to celebrate the Eucharist, may God give us grace to grasp how closely we are tethered to the saints and angels in an eternal fellowship, giving thanks for their faith, their lives, and their deaths. With God’s help, may we now and evermore be joined together as one in the Holy Spirit, gathered at the Lord’s Table here on earth and in Heaven. *Amen.*

³ Adapt. N. George-Hacker, 1 November 2013, St. Christopher’s Episcopal Church, Cobleskill NY. Used with permission.

¹ “Saints in Anglicanism,” 5 August 2022, [Wikipedia.org <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saints_in_Anglicanism>](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saints_in_Anglicanism) 1 November 2022.

² Jason Daley, “We Haven’t Been Zapped Out Of Existence Yet, So Other Dimensions Are Probably Super Tiny,” 8 October 2018, [Smithsonian Magazine <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/our-continued-existence-means-other-dimensions-are-probably-super-tiny-180970487/#:~:text=The%20world%20as%20we%20know,universe%20operates%20with%2010%20dimensions->](https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/our-continued-existence-means-other-dimensions-are-probably-super-tiny-180970487/#:~:text=The%20world%20as%20we%20know,universe%20operates%20with%2010%20dimensions->) 31 October 2022.

³ Adapt. William B. McClain, “All Saints’s Day: Because of Their Faith Hebrews 11:32-12:2,” [Preaching.com <http://www.preaching.com/sermons/11565779/page-4/>](http://www.preaching.com/sermons/11565779/page-4/>) 30 October 2013.

⁴ Adapt. McClain, *op.cit.*