

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

November 7, 2021 – ALL SAINTS'/ALL SOULS' DAY (*transf.*)

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Homily: “*Blessed Are They Who Die in the Lord*”

Wisdom of Solomon 3:1-9	(The souls of the righteous are in the Hand of God)
Psalms 24	(The earth is the Lord's; He is the King of Glory)
Revelation 21:1-6a	(A vision of the New Heaven and New Earth)
St. John 11:32-44	(Jesus raises Lazarus from death)

Last Friday, I hadn't seen our next-door neighbor, Jane, for a while. I wondered if she was all right so I picked up the phone and called. She laughingly informed me she had just gotten out of the shower, but was fine. “Well, I'm glad you're okay,” I said. “It's nice to know someone is thinking of me,” she responded. “That's what neighbors are for!” I answered cheerily, and said I'd see her later—when in fact, I did not. On Monday, a fellow resident asked me, “Did you hear about Jane?” “No,” I replied. “What happened?” “Oh,” said Bob, “She died.” “*What?!*” was my stunned reaction. Apparently, after living a normal day, laughing along with and helping the guys with the jigsaw puzzle that's always in progress in our fourth-floor commons room, she was found in her apartment late that evening, the victim of a stroke. Jane was taken to the nearest hospital, where she passed away. Like Mary in today's Gospel reading, I was tempted to cry out, “Lord, if you had been there, our neighbor would not have died.” Yet, I know Jesus was with Jane. She believed in and loved Him, and He, her.

We are never ready for the death of anyone, human or animal, no matter how prepared we think we may be. When we lose a loved-one or even a casual acquaintance we liked a lot, we want Jesus to stand in front of their grave and cry in a loud voice as He did for Lazarus, “Kathy, come out!” or “Stan, come out!”

And as much as we, in the Church, are taught about life after death as the promised hope of all Christian believers, no one has been there and come back to tell us about it. So, basically, we don't have a clue. The Rev. Billy Graham addressed the mystery of eternity with God when he said: “Only in heaven will we know exactly what heaven is like.”¹ Life everlasting—whether in heaven *or* hell—is as much of a Christian mystery as are Jesus being born of a virgin; His being human and divine simultaneously and inseparably; and His rising from the dead.

We have to accept all of these on faith, taking into account what the Bible says about such things. In Mark 12:26-27a (HCSB), we read: “Now concerning the dead being raised—haven't you read in the book of Moses, in the passage about the burning bush, how God spoke to him: I am the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob? He is not God of the dead but of the living.” What St. Mark is saying here is that at the time in history when God spoke to Moses, his forebears Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were already long gone from this world.

The revelation is that people likely thought of them as *dead*. But Scripture is telling us God's faithful servants are *alive!* They're just in heaven, rather than on earth. We find assurance of this in today's first lesson from the Wisdom of Solomon (3:2-3, 8b-9a): “In the eyes of the foolish they seemed to have died, and their departure was thought to be a disaster, and their going from us to be their destruction; but they are at peace... . [T]he Lord will reign over them forever. Those who trust in him will understand truth, and the faithful will abide with [*remain, stay with*] him in love, ”

As the late Billy Graham quipped about his own eventual passing: “Someday you will read or hear that Billy Graham is dead. Don't you believe a word of it! I shall be more alive than I am now. I will just have changed my address. I will have gone into the presence of God.”² The world-famous evangelist also declared: “When we reach the end of our earthly journey, we will have just begun.” And, “Death is not the end of life: it is only the gateway to eternity.”

On this Sunday we celebrate All Saints, giving thanks to God for those who have exemplified for us the highest values of the Christian faith. On All Saints' Day, November 1, I posted on Facebook 18 images of my favorite saints, both men and women, ancient and more contemporary.

Next to each picture, I created a kind of collect, stating what that saint was known for, and asking for their help and prayers. When I was done, I realized these saints held many attributes in common—such as faithfulness and obedience to God—but the single virtue they all exemplified was *courage*. Last Sunday, I talked about Martin Luther’s courage to stand up for his principles of reforming the Church and bringing it back to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and about the Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Cranmer’s fortitude when he was being burned at the stake for his reformed faith.

Most of us would like to be better Christians, but we find that everyday life gets in the way of our discipleship. Some of us even desire to share our faith with others, but since none of us takes rejection or mockery well, we’re reluctant to witness to people about Jesus. To become better disciples and have the courage to share, and stand up for, our faith, we need help both from God and from our friends in heaven—saints *and* family members.

In this regard, part of the Roman Catholic liturgy’s Eucharistic Prayer III came to mind: “Grant that we, who are nourished by [Christ’s] body and blood, may be filled with His Holy Spirit, and become one body, one spirit in Christ. May He ... enable us to share in the inheritance of Your saints, with Mary, the Virgin Mother of God, with the apostles, the martyrs, and all your saints, *on whose constant intercession we rely for help.*” Did you get that last phrase? “On whose *constant* (non-stop, 24/7) *intercession* (prayer) *we rely* (depend on, trust in) *for help* (aid, support, assistance, guidance). *We need* their help and prayers, and they are more than willing to offer them for us.

Today we also commemorate these faithful departed, loved ones and others who have gone onto glory before us, and for whose presence we shall always long until we see them again. Perhaps our greatest consolation in the face of death and final loss—other than the promise of the resurrection and eternal life, through Jesus Christ—is the reality that all Christians, whether on earth or in heaven, past, present, or future, are united in the Communion of Saints. The earliest-known mention of this vast spiritual community appears in the 4th-century Nicene Creed, which we recite as an affirmation of our faith, almost every Sunday.

As brothers and sisters united in the Communion of Saints which includes both earth and heaven—*but not hell*—it is natural for us to ask for help from our fellow community members. At home, hanging over my desk, I have around 16 icons, at least 6 of which show Jesus Christ. The rest include the Blessed Virgin Mary, St. Michael the Archangel, St. John the Evangelist, St. Francis, St. Nina, and others. It is not unusual for me to look up at times and ask, “Blessed Mother, pray for us. St. John, pray for us. Ye holy martyrs, apostles, and saints, pray for us.” And I feel certain they do. In fact, we must never forget the assurance that is ours found in Hebrews 7:25: [Christ] is able to save completely those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to intercede for them.” *Jesus Himself* prays for us “always.” Wow! I don’t know about you, but I find that *enormously* comforting and encouraging.

As we continue our celebration of All Saints and All Souls, I’d like to start winding this up with the words from Revelation 14:13 (NCV) that are often heard at Anglican funerals: “‘Blessed are the dead who die from now on in the Lord.’ The Spirit says, ‘Yes, they will rest from their hard work, and the reward of all they have done stays with them.’”

Last Monday, as the puzzle crew and I continued to process the shock of our neighbor Jane’s sudden and unexpected going from us, we—a handful of Christians—concluded that she’s doing much better now, and although we are saddened by her passing, we rejoice that she is with the Lord, as well as with her sister and former roommate, Joyce, who died soon after we moved to Cornwall Manor.

May the promises of Holy Scripture, the actual resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and the reality of the Communion of Saints, lift our spirits and soothe our souls, until the day we are reunited with our loved ones—and all the saints and angels—and best of all, Our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, who is “not the God of the dead but of the living.” To Him be all glory, praise, honor, worship, and thanksgiving, now and forever. Amen!

¹ “100 Quote from Billy Graham,” [Billy Graham Evangelistic Association of Canada](https://www.billygraham.ca/100-quotes-from-billy-graham/), n. d. <<https://www.billygraham.ca/100-quotes-from-billy-graham/>>

² “Quotes and Guidance from Billy Graham,” [Billy Graham Evangelistic Association](https://billygraham.org/story/quotes-and-guidance-from-billy-graham/), 21 February 2018 <<https://billygraham.org/story/quotes-and-guidance-from-billy-graham/>>