

Date: November 2, 2003

SUNDAY: All Saints

SERMON: Taking Our Stand on Hope

Text(s): Revelation 21:1-7; John 11:32-44

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During our six years in Malaysia, one of the most memorable sights was the cemetery behind St. Joseph's cathedral on the eve of All Saints Day. The cathedral sat on level ground along the main road into the city, but just behind it, a terraced hill rose up, and the cemetery was built on that hillside. For much of the year, the grass in the cemetery was allowed to grow without being cut. But a few days before All Saints, the grass would be cut, families would come out to clean up the area around their ancestors' graves, and get ready for the Feast of All Saints. On the evening before, just before dusk, the families who had loved ones buried in that cemetery would gather in the cathedral for communion, and then go out to the graves. Each family would outline the grave or monument with candles—perhaps as many as a hundred or more.

What a sight it was at night to drive by the cathedral, and see that hill rising behind it with literally thousands of candles lit, defining each burial site, and in the glow of the candlelight, you could see the families sitting around the graves, some of them eating a picnic supper they had brought with them, others simply having something of a family reunion, others tending the candles, relighting any that had gone out. And there they would hold vigil until midnight.

It was not only a magnificent sight to see; it was a wonderful testimony to the sense of community that those families felt with their own dear dead

Henri Nouwen, in his book *Gracias* tells of witnessing a similar observance of All Saints by the poor Indian Christians in a cemetery in Cochabamba, Bolivia, where he was studying Spanish. After witnessing there the deep sense of ongoing communion with departed family members, he went back to the language school that evening for a communion service in the

chapel. He wrote,

It seemed to me that all who had been part of my day, my family members and friends for whom I had prayed earlier in the morning, and the students and teachers at the school, and the Indian people of Cochabamba and their dead, as well as all the believers who live and die on this earth were gathered around the table. When the bread and the cup, the body and blood of our Lord were shared, I felt even more a part of the mysterious interchange I had witnessed in the cemetery. Yes, we are all one people loved by one Lord, who became food and drink for us all, and thus took away whatever may separate the dead from the living.

The next morning, after this moving experience of the renewal of Christian hope, he read in the newspaper an interview with Samuel Cohen, the scientist who is regarded as the father of the neutron bomb. In the interview, Cohen said that he had never had any regrets for having invented this weapon, perhaps the most cynical weapon ever invented because it is designed to destroy only people, not property. He considered war to be an inevitable and natural part of human life, and fully expected that his weapon would one day be used to kill millions of human beings. Nouwen says that the contrast between the hope and continuity of human community that he saw expressed in the cemetery and at the Lord's Table in Cochabamba and the cynicism of the nuclear physicist overwhelmed him.

It's a contrast that overwhelms all of us, I suspect, and the temptation of cynicism is familiar to many of us, especially when we tune in the news each evening and see yet more reports from the collective insanity that passes for politics in the latest violence between Palestinians and Israelis or watch homes and forests in California go up in smoke from fires deliberately set. It's a contrast between what we want to believe about ourselves and about God and about the future of our world, and the grim, depressing, and sometimes horrible reality that surrounds us. Is the Feast of All Saints more than a day to express a vain, but comforting, hope that this life is not

the end of us? Is it only a day for remembering departed loved ones, but with no assurance that our communion with them is anything more than just a communion of fond or painful memories?

That tension between the reality and immediacy of the powers of death that we see all around us and the yearning in our hearts for a better world, for life that transcends death, is where each of us lives every moment. The Apostles' Creed, that classic summary of Christian faith ends with "*I believe in the resurrection of the body and in the life everlasting,*" but when we when we wake up in the morning with a new ache in our joints or a pain where we didn't have one the day before, or worse, when we actually lose someone close to us, as three families in our congregation have this past week, we are not seized with the conviction that we or the world is about to experience resurrection or life everlasting. Feels more like death everlasting

John Calvin, one of the fathers of the Protestant Reformation, understood very clearly this tension between what we say we believe in and hope for and the reality we see and experience every day. He says,

To us is given the promise of eternal life—but to us the dead! A blessed resurrection is proclaimed to us—meantime we are surrounded by decay. We are called righteous, and yet sin lives in us. We hear of ineffable blessedness—but meantime, we are here oppressed by infinite misery. We are promised abundance of all good things—yet we are rich only in hunger and thirst. What would become of us if we did not take our stand on hope, and if our heart did not hasten beyond this world through the midst of the darkness upon the path illumined by the Word and Spirit of God?

What would become of us if we did not take our stand on hope? That's just about the ultimate question in life, isn't it? If we take our stand strictly on what we see and hear, then Samuel Cohen, the father of the neutron bomb is

probably right in his cynical view of the future of our race and our world. There is then no reason not to live completely self-centered, materialistic, hedonistic lives—lives like those urged upon us by the old commercial for Schlitz beer that was popular some years ago: "You only go around once, so you've got to grab all the gusto you can." Is it possible, however, to live our lives by a different vision of reality than that which confronts us daily on our TV screens and even in our own homes? Is it possible to perceive and live by a reality that lies hidden to our eyesight much of the time, and which can be seen and grasped only in faith and hope?

The poet and pastor who wrote the Book of Revelation was a man who knew how to live in this tension between two often contrasting versions of reality, one perceived by eyesight and the other perceived only by the insight of faith and hope. Caught up in the wave of persecution the Roman state was beginning to unleash against the Christians, he was banished to a barren island in the Aegean, exiled from home and family and church. Nevertheless he urged the congregations of Asia Minor for which he was the shepherd to disbelieve the evidence of their physical eyesight and live instead by the insight of faith. He urged them to take their stand on hope. That hope gave him a vision of "*a new heaven and a new earth,*" and a new city, "*the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, like a bride adorned for her husband.*" In this new city, there are no blighted ghettos, no violent crime, no temples to human greed and pride. Rather, in this city, "*death will be no more, mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the former things have passed away.*" This is not a vision of our world, trapped in its own vicious cycle of sin and poverty and death; this is a world re-made, re-created, fresh from the hand of God, a world in which God himself dwells among mortals and makes his home there, and where each of the citizens of that city has unlimited access to the fountain of the water of life.

Nor, for John, is this vision only a pipe-dream, the fantastic wishful thinking of a depressed prisoner. For him, it is a living, present experience. Even now, by faith and hope, we enter into the reality of that vision. We taste the first fruits of the entire banquet yet to come.

The beautiful story in our gospel lesson further emphasizes how that hope enters into our lives as a present experience. In John's portrait of Jesus, we see a man who lived fully in the human experience of grief, of loss, of the sharp pain of separation caused by the death of his close friend Lazarus, and yet at the same time, lived by that other, hidden dimension of reality. Jesus weeps at his friend's grave. He feels the loss as all of us feel loss. He shares the pain of Mary and Martha. He feels the full sting of death.

But he also sees beyond the power of death to destroy and hurt. He says to Martha, "*Your brother will rise again,*" and Martha, like the good religious person she is, responds as any of us might. She says, as though she were reciting the Apostles' Creed, "*Yes, Lord, I know that he will rise in the resurrection at the last day.*" She's repeating her confirmation lessons. She's learned them well. She believes. But she also lives in the real world. And nothing at this moment is more real to her than the fact that her brother is dead and buried. Martha believes in the resurrection, but the resurrection hasn't got into her yet.

But Jesus has a question for Martha. Jesus asks her as they stand outside the tomb of Lazarus, "*Did I not tell you, that if you would have faith, you would see the glory of God?*"

I believe that's the question St. John wants to ask each of us this morning? "Did I not tell you that if you would have faith you would see the glory of God?" By faith, I mean what the scriptures mean by that word—a trusting of ourselves and our whole lives, past, present, and future, to God. To have faith means to make God the foundation of our lives, to stake our lives on God's reality and God's promises rather than

on what we see around us. To have faith is to dare to live by a different vision of reality when our senses tell us otherwise. Faith sees what is invisible to the human eye. Faith enables us "to hasten beyond this world" as Calvin put it. Faith enables us to "take our stand on hope."

We have to decide upon what ground we will take our stand. What vision of reality will we base our life upon? Will we live by the reality we see on our TV screens or encounter in our offices or in our sometimes broken lives and relationships, or will we dare to trust that our lives and the world have a larger meaning and are destined for a future that outstrips our ability to imagine it? The choice we make between those alternatives will make a real and significant difference in how we live. It will affect every area of our lives. It will affect our decisions about our vocations, our jobs, our family relationships, our personal ethical decisions, our relationship to money and possessions—everything we do, every decision we make will be influenced by the vision of reality we choose to live by.

To take our stand on hope is not easy, however; often, it feels like all the evidence is to the contrary, and, quite frankly, I don't think it really is possible to stand on hope all by ourselves. That's why we need this feast of All Saints. We need to remember that we are not alone, despite our culture's skewed overemphasis on individualism. We are part of a community that transcends, not only the generations before us and still to come, but transcends time and mortality itself. We are part of a community of faith and memory. We remember and recite God's deeds in the lives of our ancestors, not only those biblical ancestors like Abraham and Moses and Ruth and Jesus and Mary Magdalene and Paul, but also in the lives of ancestors more near to us in time. Telling the stories of Joshua Chamberlain or Harriet Beecher Stowe to name two of our local ancestors in faith, or those like Dietrich Bonhoeffer whose courage and conviction led him to resist Hitler and his Nazis or

Mother Teresa and her ministry to the poorest of the poor in Calcutta or Archbishop Romero of El Salvador, shot dead at the altar because of his outspoken advocacy for the poor who were kept that way by corrupt and violent government leaders, can inspire us to follow their examples and emulate their courageous faith. When we gather now with our fellow believers to sing and worship and pray for the world, we testify that we are part of a great company who have chosen hope over cynicism.

Perhaps nowhere does this choice to take our stand on hope more clear than when we gather around the Lord's Table, and testify that we are anticipating by faith that greater Table in the New Jerusalem, a Table large enough for all God's people to be seated around it. We witness to our trust that we live in a world that has a future, not a future of destruction, but of life—eternal life. We also testify that the love of God signified in the bread and wine, has broken down whatever it is that separates the dead from the living, that here around this table, we are in communion, not only with one another, but with all the saints, both those who have gone before us, and those who yet shall be.

*Let saints on earth unite to sing
with those to glory gone,
for all the servants of our King
in earth and heaven are one.*