
“Foretastes and Feast-Tastes ”

A REFLECTION on Isaiah 25:6-9 and Revelation 21:1-6a for All Saints Sunday
Preached 7 November 2021 by the Rev. Matthew Emery, Lead Minister
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Each year when All Saints Sunday comes around, I often end up thinking about my grandmother. Vivian was her name. Vivian Lucille Walters was born in 1905 in North Star Township, an entirely rural section of the largely rural county in central lower Michigan where I, too, grew up. Her father, Herbert, he'd grown up there, too. Her mother, Maud, was from the next county just to the south, a similarly rural stretch of farming townships with the occasional small village. Vivian lived the vast majority of her 105 years within 25 kilometres or so of there. And so has my father; aside from the time he spent in the Army during Vietnam and two years he spent in trade school in Flint learning to be a mechanic, he's lived in little ol' Ithaca, Michigan, his whole life.

It's natural to think about the people and places from which we've come today, because indeed, All Saints Day is a time Christians have set aside to remember and celebrate those who have gone before us, all the “saints” who “from their labours rest.” I suspect part of the reason I tend especially to think of my grandmother Vivian at this time is that hers was the first death for me, as an adult, of a family member with whom I was reasonably close. Both my grandfathers passed away when I was but a toddler, and other deaths in the family had been distant cousins, great uncles I barely knew, and so forth. Vivian, though—or “Gramma Emery” as we called her—she'd occupied a much more special place, for me and for both of my sisters, too. We knew much of her story, and she much of ours.

The stories of where we come from, who we come from, where we've been... these are important. And not only for our personal stories, either. Much of our identity as Christians is shaped by the stories of where we've come from. Our worship and our formation in the faith is centered around what amounts to something like a family scrapbook, the writings of the Bible being like little windows into how our forebears made their journey with God and one another. As we dwell in the stories, the poems, the letters and the law codes, the varied witnesses we encounter begin to give us a sense of just how this family of faith understands itself, and more importantly, just how this family of faith understands the God-to-whom-it-bears-witness. You can learn a lot through someone's or some group's origin story—they way they give witness to where they come from, the way they talk about who and whose they are.

But All Saints Day isn't just about the past. You see, none of us are solely defined by where we come *from*. And even as people of faith—as Christians—we are not simply the sum total of those who have gone before us, simply quaint re-enactors of a history that is all in the past. Just as important—just as much a part of who we are—as any of our stories of origin are, so to is our story of *destination*. Where are you headed? In what direction is our life taking us?

Our story of *destination* tells us where we are going, and for us as Christians, *that* is as much a part of who we are as is where we came *from*. In fact, our Bible is bookended with our story of origin and our story of destination as mirrors of one another—Genesis confessing the roots of creation itself in God's presence and power, and Revelation foretelling (in its impressionistic and poetic-license-filled ways) the reality of God's ultimate victory in the finality

of all things. Or, in other words, as one scholar succinctly puts it, “The answer to both questions—where we are from and where we are headed—is the same: God.”¹

This is our destination story, my friends, that we in fact are headed somewhere in particular, that we are headed back to God. And that’s not just true for us as individuals—for singular ourselves, or for the particular “saints” we’ve lifted up in memory today—but it is true for us in a larger, collective sense as well. Communion with God is the destiny of church... of the nations... of the entire created order. “The church that is *not* seeking communion with God,” says one pastor, “[it] is not a church, but a secular institution with religious trappings.”² This day when we lift up in blessed memory those from our midst who have died—even amidst any mournfulness, it is also a day to look into the mystery and see in the journey of that great cloud of witnesses our own hopeful destiny and that of the world, the final future of our dwelling with God and God’s dwelling with us.

In that way, a day like today is a day of foretaste—the dwelling with God of all the saints in light a foretaste of the fate that awaits all of us and the whole of creation. In fact, my friends, we are invited to just such a foretaste each and every time we gather here at this table, this *feast* table. As we heard a few moments ago, the prophet Isaiah foresaw it, too, in the days of old: a feast that God will make for all people, a feast of rich food and well-aged wine, a feast that marks the place where God destroys death itself.

Here at this table, we come to share in a feast where we are fed with none other than the very presence of Christ himself. When two disciples walked a road heading toward Emmaus, mourning the loss of the one they’d been following, those disciples came to discover *this* feast, *this* breaking of bread, as *the* feast that marked God’s victory over death. Wherever this feast is spread out, it becomes the very mount on which God swallows up death forever, the day when the Lord God wipes away the tears from all faces, the time when the disgrace of God’s people is taken away from all the earth.

You see, even as much as we come together to remember our origin stories—to hear the words of the Bible that remind us where we come from—*the* thing we come together to do as Christians, *the* central thing that marks us as the Church, is that we come together to pre-enact our destination story. We come, we gather around this table, we celebrate this feast, and we get a little foretaste of the presence and power of God in our midst. We get to glimpse the truth that the home of God is, in fact, here among mortals, that God dwells with us, and we will be God’s people, and God’s very self will be with us.

“It will be said on that day, ‘Lo this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us.’” Come, my friends, come to this table and know “that day” to be *our* day: today and in every tomorrow. For indeed, this *is* “the Lord for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in [God’s] salvation.”

¹ David S. Cunningham, theological commentary on Revelation 21:1-6a for All Saints Day, in *Feasting On The Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Year B, vol. 4 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 232.

² Daniel J. Price, commentary on Revelation 21:1-6 in *The Lectionary Commentary: Theological Exegesis for Sunday’s Texts*, ed. Roger E. Van Harn, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 611.