

“Celebrating 100 Years: The Ministry of the Ancestors”  
Revelation 7:9-17  
Sunday, October 30, 2011  
The Rev. Sharon Snapp-Kolas, preaching

Scripture. Prayer.

**Opening.**

According to Today in the Word, “Neil Marten, a member of the British Parliament, was once giving a group of his constituents a guided tour of the Houses of Parliament. During the course of the visit, the group happened to meet Lord Hailsham, then lord chancellor, wearing all the regalia of his office. Hailsham recognized Marten among the group and cried, ‘Neil!’ Not daring to question or disobey the ‘command,’ the entire band of visitors promptly fell to their knees!” (July 30, 1993).

Today, as we continue our series, “Celebrating 100 Years,” it would be appropriate for us to fall to our knees, in gratitude to God for the blessings of our great history. Today’s topic, “The Ministry of the Ancestors,” is reason for deep gratitude.

In 100 years’ time, this church has seen many saints go on to glory. You who are sitting here in this room today can remember many beloved church members who have died during your time here. We can also remember loved ones who have died among our families and friends.

At the end of today’s service, we will light candles and ring bells to remember those who have died during the past year. We will also hold in our hearts the many ancestors of our church over the past 100 years. And we will hold in our hearts family members and friends who have gone on before us, to show us the way to glory. And we will honor the saints of the church, down through the ages, on whose shoulders we stand.

We remember and honor all the saints today.

## **I. Strength out of Grief**

On All Saints Sunday, many of us carry a load of grief and loss as we come to worship. This is not a bad thing. To miss our loved ones, to remember our friends, to honor the saints and the ancestors – this is honorable.

Terry Fisher quotes Marilyn J. Abraham, from her book, First We Quit Our Jobs: “We signed up for a hike with a ranger, who told us a remarkable thing: when a tree's life is threatened, stressed by the elements of fire, drought, or other calamity, it twists beneath its bark to reinforce and make itself stronger. On the surface, this new inner strength may not be visible, for the bark often continues to give the same vertical appearance. Only when the exterior is stripped away, or when the tree is felled, are its inner struggles revealed.” Adds Fisher, “God can use our grief to strengthen us in ways that are not visible to the world.”

We do not choose grief. It finds each of us at some point in life. We do not want to be strengthened in this way. Given the choice, we would pass on this “growth opportunity,” and have our loved one still with us.

But given the reality of grief and loss as a part of life, we can take some comfort in knowing and trusting the inner strength that God provides. We may not feel strong. We may feel fragile, on the edge of tears. We may feel flat, emotionless, as though nothing matters anymore. We may feel angry or confused or guilty or desperate or lonely.

All these responses to grief are normal. Each person grieves differently, but every person grieves when they experience a loss.

And every Christian experiences this inner, invisible strength from God. I don't know about non-Christians, but I know Christians receive strength from God when we most need it.

We may not be aware of it. We might even deny it, if someone were to suggest to us that we seem stronger. But it is the way of God, to be with us in all things, and to be with us, especially, in grief. How could we not be stronger, when God is present with us?!

## **II. All is Well**

Even if we know, intellectually, that God is with us, we can fall into fear and anxiety and the never-ending cycle of worry.

William B. Kincaid, III, in his book, And Then Came the Angel, writes about Robert Louis Stevenson. He refers to a story about a storm, in which Stevenson, “describes a ship caught off a rocky coast threatening death to all on board. When terror among the people was at its worst, one man, more daring than the rest, making the perilous passage to the pilot house, saw the pilot lashed to his post, with his hands on the wheel and turning the ship little by little into the open sea. When the pilot saw the ghastly white, terror-stricken face of the man, he smiled, and the man rushed to the deck below, shouting: ‘I have seen the face of the pilot, and he smiled. All is well.’ The sight of that pilot’s smiling face averted panic and converted despair into hope. So it is that the sight of the face of Christ and the knowledge of the love of God gives us a peace and comfort and confidence as we go through the process of mourning.”

As we remember and honor all the saints today, we cannot help but feel a sense of grief and loss. We wish they were still here with us. We may also feel fear at the inevitability of our own deaths.

At those times when we feel grief or fear, we can look into the face of Jesus, we can see the smiling face of the Pilot. And we can know all is well.

### **III. Trust in God**

In our scripture reading for this morning, John writes, "...for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

There are many such promises in scripture, for those times when we grieve, and for those times when we fear death.

Hear these thoughts from Our Daily Bread: "On his deathbed, British preacher Charles Simeon smiled brightly and asked the people gathered in his room, 'What do you think especially gives me comfort at this time?' When they all remained silent, he exclaimed, 'The creation! I ask myself, 'Did Jehovah create the world or did I?' He did! Now if He made the world and all the rolling spheres of the universe, He certainly can take care of me. Into Jesus' hands I can safely commit my spirit!'

"Hudson Taylor, founder of China Inland Mission, in the closing months of his life said to a friend, 'I am so weak. I can't read my Bible. I can't even pray. I can only lie still in God's arms like a little child and trust.'" (January 1, 1994).

There are some among us this morning who can relate to feeling weak. Some among us conquered great physical struggles in order to make it to church this morning. Some among our church family are too weak to make the trip. But our prayers are with them in their homes and hospitals, and their prayers are with us, too, I am sure.

For all of us, both the weak and the strong, we are free to "lie still in God's arms like [children] and trust." We can trust in God, because God is trustworthy. We do not have to wait to get to heaven in order for God to wipe every tear from our eyes. We can ask God to wipe

away our tears today. Right now. God loves us and grieves with us. God's desire is to comfort us and to wipe away our tears. God loves us like little children.

Did you know? You are the apple of His eye. He loves you. Won't you trust Him with all your worries and cares and grief and loss?

### **Closing.**

Ultimately, this passage from the Revelation to John is about worship. In verses 11 and 12, John writes, "And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, singing, 'Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.'"

No matter what our situation in life, we have the privilege of joining with the angels in heaven to worship our God. What a joy. When we worship God, we not only add our voices to the praises of the angels; we add our voices to the praises of our ancestors, of all the saints who have gone before us. Joy too deep for words.

In his book, The Integrity Crisis, Warren W. Wiersbe writes, "True biblical worship so satisfies our total personality that we don't have to shop around for man-made substitutes.

William Temple made this clear in his masterful definition of worship:

" 'For worship is the submission of all our nature to God. It is the quickening of conscience by His holiness; the nourishment of mind with His truth; the purifying of imagination by His beauty; the opening of the heart to His love; the surrender of will to His purpose -- and all of this gathered up in adoration, the most selfless emotion of which our nature is capable and therefore the chief remedy for that self-centeredness which is our original sin and the source of all actual sin.' "

Today, as we worship God together, with all the saints and angels and ancestors and inhabitants of heaven, let us remember to reach out to each other. Part of our calling as Christians is to be a support to one another, in good times and in bad, knowing that God is present with us in all things.

As we celebrate the lives of those who have died this past year, we grieve for ourselves because we miss them. But we feel joy for them; they have a new life in glory, face to face with our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Praise God for all the Ancestors of the United Methodist Church of Yucaipa over the past 100 years of ministry in this place.

Praise God for the members of our church family who have died during the past year.

Praise God for our friends and family who have died and whom we love and remember always.

Praise God for all the Saints of the Church universal, down through the ages.

“Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.”