Sermon for The Feast of All Saints

Delivered at Christ Church Los Altos on Sunday, November 4, 2018

Text: Revelation 21:1-6a
Title: The dream

We have so much to celebrate this morning! The Ventana Choirsters are with us, and soon we’ll commission our school’s Leadership Team. This is also the last week in our annual Stewardship campaign, when we give special thanks for all those committing to support Christ Church in mission and ministry next year. And there’s the baptism of Davis, when we welcome her into Christ’s body, the Church. We have so much to celebrate this morning, and if ever there was a feast that could hold all these threads together, it is All Saints Day - a most peculiar feast.

The Church year essentially follows the life of Jesus. It begins in Advent, as we anticipate Christ’s coming into the world, an anticipation that comes to fulfillment with Christmas. In Epiphany, we linger in the light Christ brings with him, the light of the miraculous star, the light of God shining in our hearts, until we come to the Penitential season of Lent, leading up to the darkness of Good Friday and the glory of Easter. Fifty days after the empty tomb, we welcome the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, and for the rest of the year we reflect on what it means to live in that Spirit, to be a mystical body inspired – literally meaning “breathed by” – that Spirit as the Church.

We are currently in this season after Pentecost, reflecting on what it means to be knit together into Christ’s body, members of the communion of Saints, a communion so great that not even death divides it. It is into this communion that Davis will shortly be welcomed. And as we walk that path year after year, our journey is punctuated by seven feasts – celebrations of major transitions and revelations like Easter and Christmas and Pentecost, but also Epiphany, Ascension, Trinity Sunday, and, yes, All Saints. But if you spend much time thinking about these seven special days, you may find yourself thinking, or singing, “one of the things is not like the other.”

All of the principal feasts of the Church relate directly to the life of Jesus, except today’s. We tell this very specific story about Jesus over and over again, because we believe his life reveals something particular and powerful about God, but All Saints is a once a year invitation to take a step back. To shift our perspective. Refocus our frame. It is a day when we celebrate the heroes of our faith: people whose lives, like Jesus’ life, reveal something particular and powerful
about the nature of God, but it is also a day when we reflect on how much a part of this web of holy lives we are, and how God’s light continues to shine in and through us, together, too.

Sometimes, entering into the story of Jesus can seem … well … hard. There’s something compelling in it, drawing us in, but it can seem somehow out of reach, too complex or too simple to fully comprehend. Almost as though if we could just get a little closer it would all make more sense. But All Saints reminds us that, sometimes, a story becomes clearer when we take a step back instead and embrace a broader view, a longer look.

I’m guessing everyone here is familiar with the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s 1963 “I have a dream” speech, delivered at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. I’m guessing some actually remember that day, and that many of us who weren’t even born then have nevertheless seen granny clips of his impassioned, inspiring words. But let’s take a step back from that moment – a small step, really – and see if the story doesn’t come into a different focus.

Martin was a young pastor – only 25 – when he took his first call in Birmingham, Alabama, fresh out of seminary and not yet done with his doctorate. He was thoughtful and inclined toward academia, telling friends he’d be perfectly happy to serve a quiet parish, finish his Ph.D., and raise his young family. But he got caught up in history just a year later when Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a segregated bus, and the black community in his city boycotted in response. King had many natural gifts for leadership, among them public speaking, but he emerged as a leader in the Civil Rights movements slowly, still very much a flawed, particular person with his own interests and passions.

One of those passions was music, and he, like everyone who loved Gospel at the time, was a big fan of Mahalia Jackson. So, it worked out well for everyone that Mahalia began opening for the speakers at many large Civil Rights rallies. Martin and Mahalia were together so often that they became familiar with one another’s repertoire. He would often suggest hymns and spirituals to her to fit a particular day. She, in turn, heard him talk, preach, and converse, in formal and informal settings alike.

As the March on Washington approached, Martin struggled with his speech. It was OK, but just OK. As the speakers gathered that day, Mahalia was also on stage, opening with two powerful hymns. When Martin’s turn came, he stood before the microphone and read the words before him. And it was OK, but just OK. Until, as he drew toward the end, Mahalia, standing just
behind him, whispered something. Mahalia had been with him for long enough now that she had heard some of his less polished, more personal musings, and one thing he had been talking about a lot in black Churches was this vision he had, as radical and compelling and earth-shaking, perhaps, as the vision described in today’s passage from Revelation of “a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away.”

Mahalia felt something stirring within her as Martin’s moment began slipping away, and all stirred up she leaned forward and said, “Tell ‘em about the dream, Martin. Tell ‘em about the dream.” And if you watch those old grainy videos, or you remember it yourself, this is the moment when Martin goes off script. This is the moment when Martin lets that wild and wonderful Spirit breath through him, and he confesses, proclaims, prophesies, “I have a dream.” History will forever remember this as Martin’s speech, and it was, and it is, but it is not only Martin’s speech. That is precisely what made it so powerful: the words spoken on behalf of a much greater cloud of witnesses; words spoken on behalf of so many dreamers; words whispered in hope, in fear, in trembling.

We’re all gathered here this morning for countless different reasons. But let’s take one step back this morning. Again, not so far back. Just a few decades, and see if our story doesn’t come into a different focus, too. Back to 1913, when faithful Episcopalians began meeting on the second floor of a bank downtown, eventually founding the first Church in this city before moving to a quaint little campus on Orange Avenue. Fast forward some fifty years, and the community had grown so much as to outgrow that home, and people began dreaming – dreaming of a more spacious campus in the hills. And so, just as people had pledged their time and money and energy to keep the Church going all along, they pledged more of the same to purchase this land and build these buildings, always intended to house a Church and a school. And families continued to join, including Davis’ grandparents, and to raise their children here, including Davis’ dad and aunt, and to offer gifts and goods and gratitude and grace to the life of this community, until finally, in 2005, Ventana school was founded.

So you see, the story of All Saints – the story of how God continues to shine in the lives of the saints today, in OUR lives - it is our story. It is the story of how our lives – all our lives – are also bound up in wide webs of community, bonds of love and affection that transcend time and space, held together in a story of God’s own self, a story so great and glorious as to include those who have come before us and those who will come after us. It is the story of a community
of people who know each other well and who are just getting to know each other; who dwell in the same familiar places at different times and for different reasons. Of children who once worshipped in the Chapel who come back to lay their parents to rest in the columbarium, parents who laid our cornerstones. Of children raised here who come home to baptize their children. Of children who rehearse in the Chapel who come to sing here some Sunday mornings. Of saints who revel in the Parish Hall, where saints who went before once worshiped while this Church was being built.

When we take a step back, we can see so much more clearly how Davis’ life, and her light, is already and always has been a part of this communion, and how each of our lives and the light we bear for this world are, too. Thanks be to God that it is a communion big enough for all of us. Big enough for our stories. Big enough, even, for our wildest dreams. Amen.