

A Sermon for Covenant

All Saints Day

1 John 3:1-3

Covenant Baptist Church, San Antonio

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Ever since we moved here, I've been going to a Catholic library down Interstate 410 every week to study for my sermons. I like it there—it's exceptionally quiet, they've got most of my favorite biblical commentaries, and, most importantly, the building has great big windows. I can't study without a window in front of me. I don't know if they've noticed yet The Baptist who frequents their library—I've thought about wearing a collar and a cross to blend in.

This week, as I was preparing for All Saints Day, I discovered that if you're writing a sermon about the saints, there is no better place to study than a Catholic library. I went in search of one particular book about saints, but as I tugged it from its snug spot on the shelf, I realized it was engulfed on all sides by a multitude of books about the saints. I even spotted a book entitled, "The Who's Who of Heaven." Catholics love their saints and do much to remember them.

The observance of All Saints Day dates back to the 7th century, but growing up as a Southern Baptist in the middle of Oklahoma, I'd never heard of it. It *was* a Baptist church that first introduced me, however. I was visiting a church during seminary, and on the Sunday near Nov. 1, you could walk forward at the end of the church service and place a flower in a bouquet in memory of an inspirational figure in your life. I'd never done anything like that before, but it moved me down deep somewhere.

Just a few short weeks after that service, Nate and I lost a dear, beloved friend. It was my first up close and shocking encounter with the death of someone so young. Next time All Saints Day rolled around, I was poised and ready to remember Andrew.

Two summers ago I spent a week at the Monastery of Christ in the Desert, about an hour outside Santa Fe, New Mexico. I noticed that monks never forget the dead. They pray for them and pray to them. In some ways, that was very foreign to me, and I wasn't always sure what I thought about it. But one thing in particular caught my attention.

One day we were on a tour of the monastery. Most visitors are only allowed in certain sections of the monastery, but my professor, Dr. Gloer, has been visiting this particular monastery for over a decade, and the monks have become his friends. As Dr. Gloer's class, we got to benefit from this bond—the monks took us on a tour of just about everything. We were walking down one of the private hallways that only the monks use, and there on the wall were a handful of photographs. Each photograph had a candle that hung over in front of it. "These are monks that used to live here, but have passed on," our guide explained. We learned that most of the monks chose to be buried right there on the monastery property, and every year, on the anniversary of that monk's death, or perhaps what they would call the monk's heavenly birthday, the remaining monks light the candle in front of his picture as a way to remember his testimony and give thanks for his life.

That got me thinking, and as far as I know, after Andrew died, the only thing our little Baptist church did in any formal way was to perform his funeral, and that was the end of the church's remembrance. Individuals in the church sent cards and flowers, sat with the family in the months to come, cooked meals, etc. But as a gathered faith community, as the church of God in worship, we did nothing more. It was like we thought the only way to respect his heavenly resurrection was to forget his earthly life, which is silly. I don't know how the church got so confused about , because as humans, we know better than that—we intuitively create ways to remember the lives of those we lost, to honor their virtues, to make sure their life has continuing impact.

I was at a luncheon on Thursday where a woman read to us from an obituary she found in the paper. She didn't know the person at all. She makes a habit of reading the obituaries, and this one caught her eye. She read to us about a young man—I think he was only 26—who passed away in his sleep. She read it to us because she found inspiration in the words. She heard a calling to imitate this man, whom she'd never met, because of the beautiful way his family had chosen to depict and remember his life. It is in our nature to remember the saints or the nearly saints who impact our life and shape who we are.

There have been times throughout the church's history where the church got a little extreme in their veneration of saints. *But* there is a healthy tradition of remembering saints buried beneath the hype that the church must uncover and restore, for the saints are a part of us, a part of the ongoing Church of God. We cannot forget them. The book of Hebrews calls them the “great cloud of witnesses” surrounding us. And “*because they surround us,*” writes the author of Hebrews, “let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles . . .” Because of them, we strive ahead, fixing our eyes on Jesus, as they did. They are our inspiration, our example, our encouragement.

Who exactly qualifies as a saint, anyway? In today's text, 1 John 3 reminds us that when Christ appears, we will all be saints: “we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.” Verse 2 calls us believers “children of God”—we could also be called “saints-in-training” or “saints-to-be.” All Christians who have gone on are saints—transformed by their face-to-face heavenly encounter with the Risen Christ. In this sense, all believers are saints.

Then again, as one author says, there are saints, and then there are saints. Those people who just seem to glow, even on earth. Sometimes, we don't see the glow until they're gone. The Catholic Church uses a whole complicated system of canonization, but even Catholics, with their host of canonized saints, observe *All Saints Day*—which is a way of remembering the ordinary saints, those people who've gone largely unnoticed and unobserved, though maybe their anonymity only makes them all the more extraordinary. You've known one of those kinds of saints before, I'm sure. That person who just exudes something special, but they don't get recognized, awarded, or promoted for it. It's just who they are—their service gives them joy and that's enough for them.

Over the course of history, some crucial saints have been spotted—Mother Theresa, Bonhoeffer, Augustine—but the majority of the saints go unrecognized, and it may be their unassuming presence, their humility that gives them that saint-like quality. The very nature of sainthood assumes an acceptance of going unrewarded, and that's a hard pill to swallow. If you set out to

be a *noticed* saint, you're doomed to fail from the start. But if you set out to find God, and to keep finding God afresh over and over again, you might just stumble into sainthood without knowing. That's the maddening thing about the walk of faith! You never get to *know* it if you're a saint. People might call you one after you're dead, but by then, it's too late for you to enjoy the glory. (Who knows? Perhaps God rigged it that way to keep us humble.)

Because of this, artists over the centuries have struggled to depict holy people in their paintings. One writer commented, "Suppose five or six people are in a lineup, could you tell which of them was the saint? Never. The way classical artists got around this was by painting a halo around the heads of saints. *Without the golden halo they looked like anyone else.* Halos are meant to indicate a spiritual quality that cannot be seen . . . Van Gogh said he wanted to 'paint men and women with that something of the eternal which the halo used to symbolize, and which we seek to convey by the actual radiance and vibration of our coloring . . .'"

It takes great skill to capture the holy in a mere painting, even if you're Van Gogh, and why shouldn't it be? You can't pick a saint out of a crowd. Then again, sometimes you live with one, and you're too close to see it.

But over time or when people pass away, we start to realize *our* life and *our* faith just wouldn't be the same if we hadn't met *him*, or *her*. Knowing them changed us, and continues to change us, even after they're gone. Knowing them helped us *know God*, because the image of God shone through them in a way that helped us see.

1 John tells us we become like God when we see him as he is. In heaven, that happens fully and completely. But on earth, it *starts* to happen, in the Christ-like people we meet. I once preached a sermon where I talked about Gran, Nate's exceptionally saintly grandmother, and I asked everyone the question, "Can you remember the old, wrinkled hands of some saint you've known somewhere in the past and visualize what those hands looked like? And if you could envision *your* face cupped in *those* tender, worn hands, would it feel like a caress from the divine, and if you looked up, would it be Jesus' eyes looking at you?" Where would we be without the love of godly people? Where would our faith, our spiritual sight, be without earthly examples on which to gaze?

A monk named Damian who used to tell his admirers, "Don't honor me, honor Christ. He is the original, I am only a pale copy." We don't worship saints. We remember them, and let their lives overlap into ours, hoping to make the virtues of those we've lost tangible once again in us.

Like the saints of the past, like the dear ones we've lost, we too are the children of God. What we will be has not yet been made known, and that's a good thing. It keeps us humble; it fuels us with holy desire. But one day, when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. Now, we know in part, because of the dear ones who've shown us. So we live by the part we know in anticipation of what we will come to know when we see him face to face. May we never forget those who have shown us the way, and may we strive ahead, holding onto hope until Christ appears. Amen.

An Invitation to Honor the Saints

I wrote part of my sermon this week in a cemetery. I walked along and read gravestones—husbands and wives, children, fathers, mothers, grandparents—people I never knew, but who meant something dear to someone. I wasn't the only one walking the cemetery that day. There were others, stooping over a stone to place flowers, to say a prayer, to retell a memory. I guess I wanted to see with my own eyes what I was trying to put into words—the multitude of saints and the solemn, mysterious empowering that awaits those who pause to remember.

I sat down to write, and on the bench were engraved the words, “Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted.”

I invite you, if you wish, to come forward during the music to light a candle in memory of someone who has inspired you, who has been as Christ to you. We'll let ourselves be reminded by the flickering lights of the great cloud of witnesses that surround us. I invite you to come.