All Saints Day

November 1, 2020

Matthew 5:1-12

 The other day, I read some stories from people of dumb things they’d said. Like the person who wanted to tell a customer either “hold on a second” or “give me a minute” but said, “hold me a second.” Or the server who meant to say, “Here’s your soup. Be careful, it’s hot,” but said, “careful, it’s soup.”

 Most of the stories included the person mentioning that they found it hard to let go of the dumb thing they’d said.

 I felt this immediate sense of comfort. I’m not alone. I both say dumb things and dwell on the fact that I did.

 Perhaps, knowing that we are not alone can be a comfort and can allow us to not be so hard on ourselves.

 This year, we are all on a journey through what the Psalmist calls the valley of the shadow. Perhaps knowing that we are not alone can be a comfort and allow us to not be so hard on ourselves.

 Typically, when we travel through the valley of the shadow, we are accompanied by those who share our common grief, and by people whose grief and mourning are not as fresh, not as painful, because they have made that journey already and have found their way out of the valley of the shadow. But this year, the coronavirus has thrust all of us into that valley at the same time. Some days, it’s hard enough to deal with our own pain, let alone try to help others with theirs.

 When we get too caught up in our own pain, when the frustrations and irritations of trying to safely and sanely navigate today’s world threaten to overwhelm us, we can easily lose sight of how God is accompanying us on our path through the valley of the shadow.

 But, as theologian Dallas Willard reminds us, “God has yet to bless anyone except where they actually are.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

 Whether we are caught up in the regret surrounding things we have said or done, or the pain of this year, it is all too easy to miss how God is blessing us where we actually are.

 All Saints Day is the church’s day for honoring and celebrating the lives of those who have gone on before us. But if we stop there, we forget a key element of our Lutheran theology: All of us, wherever we are in our faith journey, are saints.

 When the word ‘saint’ is used in the New Testament, it is always applied to the *entire church*, not to a few people who might be looked upon as being the most virtuous or most faithful. We are sanctified not because of anything we do, but out of God’s mercy and grace.

 When Jesus describes those who are blessed, those upon whom God’s favor rests, he doesn’t mention people we would normally think of as being blessed. He doesn’t mention anybody who has a perfect life. He doesn’t mention people for whom the journey through the valley of the shadow is a memory.

 Instead, he speaks of those who mourn, those who are meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness and justice. He speaks of those who labor for peace and those who are reviled for their faith.

 These are people whose lives are not easy. They are lives of difficulty, of frustration, of pain. But Jesus declares that God’s favor shines on them, because “God has yet to bless anyone except where they actually are.”

 God enters into our pain, our mourning, our suffering, and blesses us. And more often that not, that blessing comes in the form of other people.

Which is part of what makes this year so hard. When all of us are wandering through the valley of the shadow, it can be hard to remember to look for those who travel down that path with us. And it can be easy to think that our small problems aren’t worthy of asking for help from others who are surely dealing with problems of their own.

When small irritations are magnified and bigger problems threaten to overwhelm us, the idea of trying to accompany another person as *they* travel through the valley of the shadow seems an impossible idea.

 But that doesn’t let us off the hook.

We are blessed so that we may be blessings for others.

 We can allow the pain of our journey through the valley of the shadow to overwhelm us. Or we can choose to find comfort knowing that we are not alone on our journey. We are not alone in our frustrations and despair. And we are not alone in our quest to make this world a better place.

 In *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, Mr. Tumnus, the faun, tells Lucy that in Narnia, it’s always winter, but never Christmas.[[2]](#footnote-2) This is the result of the evil work done by the White Witch in her quest for power. It was hard to have hope.

 But when the forces of good work together, trusting Aslan the lion, Christmas comes again.

A few times during these past months, I’ve thought about how everything in life got upended in the middle of Lent, the time when we are meant to focus on our need for repentance and our need for God’s grace and mercy.

It feels sometimes like we got stuck in a permanent Lent, and it’ll never be Easter. It’s hard to have hope.

 All Saints Day reminds us to have hope, to trust in God’s promises that we will be reunited with our loved ones in the communion of saints and the church triumphant. We are Easter people who live in a Good Friday world: people who trust that God has defeated the power of death and will make all things new.

 Our hope tells us that, one day, we will find our way out of the valley of the shadow. We will gather together again and lift up our voices in prayer and praise. And we’ll find that God was accompanying us all along, blessing us where we actually were.

 Until that day, I encourage you to remember that you are not alone and find comfort in that knowledge. Remember the lives of those who have gone on before us to join the church triumphant, and make their memories a blessing by continuing their good work in this world.

 Let us pray: Gracious God, you have surrounded us with so great a cloud of witnesses. Grant that we may persevere in the course that is set before us and, at the last, share in your eternal joy with all the saints in light. Amen.

1. Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy,*  pp. 348-49 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, p. 16 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)