

### ***Cheering Us On***

*This sermon was preached by the Rev. Richmond Webster on Sunday, November 1, 2009 and is based Revelation 21:1.*

“And I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.” Revelation 21:1

To begin this sermon for All Saints day, I’m thinking of a scene in Harper Lee’s famous novel, *To Kill A Mockingbird*, a scene where the hero, Atticus Finch, leaves the courtroom alone.

You might remember this scene; it happens when the trial is finally over and lost, the trial in which an innocent man is found guilty, the trial in which a white lawyer living in the depression era south dares to defend a black man against his white accusers, the trial in which a town chooses the status quo over justice.

And so the defeated attorney leaves alone, abandoned by his neighbors, his colleagues, his community. He is alone, but then we see he is not alone.

In the gallery above, crowded along walls and benches and in the aisles are a sea of faces, dark faces, faces of those who are usually voiceless and invisible but on this day look upon a man who dared to speak for them.

And though he never looks up or notices, they all rise as he walks from the courtroom alone. Atticus’ children are among these faces in the gallery, and as his daughter watches from afar, she hears this gentle command: “Miss Jean Louise, stand up. Your father is passing’.”

I thought this might be a good way to start on All Saints Day, since we are apt to think of “saints” (if we think of them at all) as those stained glass figures from our misty past, with little to do with today. And, keeping in mind those words of the singer/songwriter Billy Joel, who once said he would rather laugh with the sinners than cry with the saints, we might do well to consider another dimension to this wonderful day, another role for the saints in our story, and here’s what I’m thinking:

All Saints day can be a time to remember and to celebrate our Christian faith and Christian hope that all the people in our past—parents and grandparents, husbands and wives, siblings and neighbors and friends—are still going. Life, we believe, is only changed, but it is never ended and these saints are watching and cheering us on.

All Saints day can be a time to remember that we are never left behind and we are never left alone.

Let's be honest. We need a day like this. If you have ever lost a loved one then you know what I mean; we are still here, they are not, and this is why Jesus cried beside the tomb of his friend. He knew this hurt.

And so did the man who told the story. Two of our lessons today are from the Gospel of John and the Revelation to John and tradition has it that they were written by the same John.

That said, we also know they weren't written together. By the time we get to Revelation, this John was an old man, the last of the apostles, alone and living in exile on the island of Patmos. But it was here, in the dark of his cave and by the light of a sputtering candle, John learned he wasn't alone. John had a dream, and he wrote it down.

It was a dream from God, this Revelation, a fantastic dream full of angels and dragons and lamb that was slain and sitting on a throne. It was dream of destruction and rebirth, a promise that, in spite of all appearances to the contrary, God always wins, and when God wins, we win. It was a dream of Jesus.

And in the verses we read today, we see a new heaven and a new earth, a new beginning, a new destiny for us all, where there are no more tears, no more pain, and no more sea.

It's worth taking a moment to consider why the apostle said something about the ocean here. I'm fond of reminding my Bible study classes that the Hebrews were unique among the ancient peoples in that they had a special appreciation of nature.

Contemporary pagan writers might describe a field that is good for the harvest, or land as having value for a king. A harbor might be useful for ships, or trees might be felled to build a city.

But the Hebrews saw nature as something pointing to God. Our Old Testament is just full of this stuff—the trees of the field clap their hands, the rock and hills sing out, all praising God for their very existence. We Episcopalians are very Hebrew in this way, for I've never known one who didn't like to be outside (if only on the golf course).

What they all held in common, these ancient writers, Hebrew and pagan alike, was a terror of the sea.

The book of Revelation is no exception, for the sea (we read) was a place of dragons and sea monsters, a place of wind and waves and certain death. The sea was dark and distant and everywhere, and in their time they believed it could be found above the sky, dividing this world from the next.

But in this dream the apostle saw no more sea. In his dream God promised that heaven and earth would soon be one. Pain will be a distant memory, tears will be dried from all faces, the gallery will come down and the family will be together and this is the meaning of the dream and of All Saints day.

Not too long ago I learned of a new way to think about God. I heard a preacher describe God as music. What I mean by this is that if we want to know that God is real, we don't need to spend time looking at the sky, but rather looking within. We know that God is real when we play the music of heaven within ourselves, the music of justice, of healing, of peace, of forgiveness, of healing, of service, of grace, of joy, the music of Jesus.

On this All Saints Day it occurs to me that when we play this music, we play it with them. We play this music with all who have gone before, we play this music with our family and when we play it the symphony of heaven and earth becomes one, whether we see it or not.

They are cheering us on, you know, and waiting with open arms. When we play this music we can catch a glimpse of this destiny, our destiny, and remember we are never alone.