

“For All Us Saints (and Sinners!)”
November 7, 2021
Scripture: Isaiah 25:6-9; Revelation 21:1-6a

One of my favorite movies is *Places in the Heart*, released in 1984. It’s a story about a woman in Depression era Texas whose sheriff husband is accidentally killed in the opening scenes by a Black teenager who’s drunk and wielding a gun. It’s a segregated community and the teen is lynched by the men in the town, who of course are never brought to justice. The rest of the story, after those horrible events, revolves around the widow struggling to keep her farm by raising cotton and hiring a Black man to help her. A string of characters, good and bad, populate the movie and we get a glimpse into the complexities that exist in every community. Toward the end of the film the Black man the widow hired, and whose skill made the cotton harvest a success, is beaten and run out of town by a group of Klansmen, all of whom are easily identified because they all know one another in this small town. The final scene, though, steps away from reality and depicts a service in the local church where Black and white people are gathered together. All the characters in the movie are there sharing communion, including the hired man who was run off and the people who did it; and finally, the camera pans to the sheriff who was killed as he receives the bread and passes it to the teenager who shot him with the words, “Peace of God.”

I think of that final scene whenever I hear these words from Isaiah and Revelation. Our tendency has been to interpret these images in an exclusive way. They’re meant for the faithful, the ones who believed and did the right things all their lives and receive their reward. But these passages don’t really say that, do they? What I find there are images of a whole host of people called to the feast, having their tears wiped away, being welcomed into God’s presence. And no mention of who deserves to be there and who doesn’t. They’re all welcome to the feast. The home of God is among mortals, all of us, saints and sinners alike.

Now, those of us raised in the Reformed tradition, good Presbyterian Calvinists, may have heard of two doctrines related to this: election and predestination. Election teaches that God chooses certain men and women for good, people who carry out God’s purposes in the world. We see that in all sorts of stories in the Bible. God chooses Jacob and Joseph and Moses, Deborah and Esther, Ruth and Mary. And Jesus chooses certain people as disciples, Peter and Andrew, James and John and many others. Now, as an observation from scripture we can’t deny election, but as a doctrine it becomes a problem. We like symmetry and patterns in our beliefs; if some are elected, then some must be rejected. But only God can know who is who. Images like these from Isaiah and Revelation offer us something else. They suggest maybe all are called, all are chosen; or at the very least all are desired to be God’s own.

Predestination isn’t about the here and now but about where we end up when life is over. It’s often confused with predetermination, as if everything that happens to us is laid out ahead of time. But that’s not what it’s about. Predestination teaches that God is in control of our end, our destiny. But again it’s been distorted out of our need for symmetry. If some are destined to be with God, others must be destined to be rejected. We like to believe every bad deed is punished and every good deed rewarded. And we want to see that balance continued in the afterlife. But

those images again from Isaiah and Revelation seem to say something different. They offer the possibility that maybe we all have the same destiny; all of us are meant to be with God.

And if that's true, if all us saints and sinners are destined to be with God, then what can that tell us about the here and now? If the home of God is among mortals, then the home we make here matters. If we want to see a world of compassion and justice, love and generosity, then it's up to us to make it. God welcomes all in the end, saints and sinners alike, so the time for justice, for accountability, is now. We have this chance to live in ways that reveal God's presence in the world. We have this chance to advocate for people living in poverty, to stand with the oppressed, to bring compassion to those who are left out, forgotten or neglected. Why would we waste the time we have on hatred and bigotry and greed when we know there's plenty for all and everyone's welcome in God's kingdom?

I don't know all the people whose lives we remember today, all the names listed in our bulletins. Many of them were part of this congregation but not all of them. They're our parents, spouses and friends, sisters and brothers. They're the people we love and miss, saints and sinners every one, just like all of us, yet all of them part of the "countless host" streaming into God's presence. I didn't know them all, but I think I know what they would tell us if they could. They would tell us to remember how precious and fleeting this life we have is, and to use it well. We have this moment to affect the world; we can't let it go to waste.

If the pictures painted by Isaiah and Revelation tell us anything, it's that we're meant for more than a world of despair and fear. We're meant to live in the presence of God, the shroud of death lifted from us and all our tears wiped away. It's a vision that can inspire us to use our time in new ways, to create a world of generosity, compassion and justice, a place for all us saints and sinners to call home.

Amen