

Sermon preached by the Rev. William J. Eakins  
St. John's Episcopal Church, West Hartford, CT  
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All Saints Sunday  
Year B

What awaits us when we die? Heaven? Hell? Reincarnation as another kind of being? Or oblivion, the end. We don't know what awaits us. Some people believe one thing; others believe another.

Woody Allen proposed that life would be great if we could live it backwards.

... if you could die first you could get death out of the way. Then you could live the next twenty years or so in a community for the elderly until you got too young and they would kick you out. Then you would get a gold watch and go to work for forty years until you were young enough to retire. Then you would go to college and party until you were ready for high school. After high school, you'd go to grade school, become a little kid and play all the time, with no responsibilities. Then you'd become a little baby and everyone would coo over you and take care of you. The last nine months you'd spend floating and end up as a gleam in someone's eye.

I suppose Woody Allen's backward life cycle has a certain appeal especially if you think death really is the end of life. But is death the end of our existence? Or is death the beginning of something new?

The scripture we have heard this morning affirms that death does not have the final say, God does. Isaiah promises a time that will surely be when God will put an end to death, making a joyous feast for all people and wiping away all tears. The Book of Revelation picks up the same triumphant theme. John gives us the vision of "a new heaven and a new earth," a place where "death will be no more," "mourning and crying and pain will be no more." This will be so because God is "making all things new." In today's Gospel, the promises of Isaiah and Revelation come true as Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead. The good news of this event is not the resuscitation of a corpse but the demonstration that God's power and God's love are stronger than death.

The great question we are left with is: Do we believe such promises? Our answer to that question requires more than intellectual assent to the proposition that life is more than the years between our birth and our death. Believing is seeing life as a gift from God, a precious gift to be treasured and never taken for granted. Believing is having a sense of stewardship, a consciousness that one day we will have to give an account of how we have used all that God has given us. Believing is looking ahead, not getting trapped in the past, trusting that God is leading us forward into the future. Believing is about taking risks, forgiving those who have hurt us, dreaming of a better world, and working, praying, and giving—and voting—to make that world a reality.

The saints we honor today show us what believing means. The saints include people with famous names, some of whom shine down upon us in the windows of our church: apostles like John, our parish patron, Francis of Assisi, and Samuel Seabury, people like Miriam, Hebrew midwife and sister of Moses, Albert Schweitzer, George Frideric Handel, the scientist, Marie Curie, Bertram Goodhue, the architect of our church buildings, and Ballard Dorsey, clerk of the works when St. John's was rebuilt after the big fire. All these men and women, in their own time and in their own way, had a vision of what God was calling them to do and responded faithfully. Not one of them was perfect; they were human beings. They made mistakes and had doubts, but they never gave up being people of faith.

St. John, who wrote the passage from Revelation that we heard this morning, spent years in exile on the island of Patmos, and he never lost his vision of "the new heaven and the new earth" that God will bring to pass. Samuel Seabury, Connecticut's first Bishop, spent the last eleven years of his life travelling thousands of miles on his horse or in his carriage over rough roads and in all weather, preaching and teaching, confirming and ordaining, to build our church. Miriam risked her own life to care for the infant Moses and to deliver the children of the Hebrew slaves. Albert Schweitzer gave up a comfortable life in France as a scholar and musician to study medicine

and establish a clinic in the African jungle. Francis of Assisi left riches behind to spend his life serving the poor and living out the Gospel of Christ's love for all. Bertram Goodhue dedicated most of his career to designing churches like St. John's that would combine art and architecture to inspire Christian faith. Ballard Dorsey made sure that St. John's building would continue to serve this community. Marie Curie put aside her career as a Nobel Prize winning physicist and chemist to aid wounded soldiers on the battlefields of the First World War. George Frideric Handel found his greatest pleasure as a composer in setting the words of Holy Scripture to music. Concerning his composition of the *Hallelujah Chorus* he wrote, "I did think I did see all Heaven before me and the great God himself."

St. John's is remarkable in having such a wide variety of windows that depict saints of ages past and present, saints far-flung and local, and even a large window of holy women on our back wall, but the saints of God include a much greater company than the famous people whose names and stories are remembered in the Bible, in history books, and in stained glass windows. In New Testament usage, all of us are called to be saints, or, as the familiar hymn puts it, "the saints of God are just folks like me." But we have a hard time accepting that reality. We mistakenly suppose that sainthood is a matter of perfection, and we are well aware that we are not perfect. We have done things we should not have done and failed to do what we should have done. There are times when our faith falters and we fear that God and heaven are but a dream.

The Good News is that God does not expect perfection. All that God expects is that in spite of our failures, our questions, and our doubts, we will keep on looking for answers, trusting that God will give us answers and lead us on.

Why did the saints live the way they did? Why did they sacrifice their comfort and undertake new ventures at great cost? Surely it was because in the end, they believed that there is more to life than today, more to life than taking care of ourselves; they believed that God reigns and that God calls us to make our lives matter for the greater good. The saints believed that God awaits us when we die, and believing that, they dared to spend themselves joyfully in God's service. We give thanks today for their witness and pray God for the courage to follow them.