

The Rev. Devon Anderson
Feast of All Saints; Revelation 21:1-6a; John 11:32-44
November 7, 2021

Visions. Images. Portraits. This morning I offer a series to you – glimpses of All Saints, one of the church’s principal Feast Days, a day upon which the sheer veil between life, death, and eternity descends and settles among us, the faithful in worship, the living and the dead.

The first tableau is from Louise Erdrich’s celebrated masterpiece, *LaRose*, a story of two families whose trajectories are forever impacted by a single moment in time. The story opens with Landreaux Iron who, in a North Dakota forest, is stalking deer, meat the family will eat throughout the winter. Seeing a prime buck, he shoots – but when the buck springs away, Landreaux realizes he’s hit something else, a blur he sees as he squeezes the trigger. When he staggers closer, he realizes he has killed his neighbor’s five-year-old-son, Dusty. Dusty is best friends with Landreaux’s five-year-old son LaRose. The two families have always been close, sharing food, clothing, and rides to town; Landreaux’s wife and Dusty’s mother being half-sisters with a shared family tree. The story’s central conceit is the amends: following an ancient means of retribution, Landreaux and his family give LaRose to the grieving family. “Our son will be your son now,” they say. LaRose is quickly absorbed into his new family, relationships shift, rifts present themselves, grief runs its course, alliances change.

Eventually the mutual pain of the two families begins to heal. The restoration of the story, the balance of its horrific beginning and evolution comes, of course, at the end. The families have gathered for a graduation party for one of the children, Hollis.

LaRose was given an eagle feather and an abalone shell containing a ball of smoking sage. He went around smudging the food. He brushed the holy smoke over the electric cookers, casserole dishes, cakes, the tables, and the basket of cards. He went around to the elders, who pulled the smoke over their heads, as did his sisters, and Hollis. Then the sage was ash. LaRose made a plate with a taste of everything, even a secret corner of cake, and a pinch of tobacco. He went down the side of the yard and stepped off into the trees, put the plate down at the base of a birch tree. He stood beside the tree, staring through new leaves, toward the spot he’d fasted, where Dusty and all of the others had visited him. LaRose didn’t know what to say to them, if they were out there. Oh well, he’d treat them like regular people.

You’re invited, he said in a normal voice.

When he returned, the yard around the house was crowded with people talking, filling plates with food, laughing and laughing, like, well, a bunch of Indians. So many people were eating that all the chairs were taken, then the back steps, the front steps. Towels were laid out on top of the cars so girls wouldn’t stain their flouncy skirts with car dirt. People stood talking with plates of food in their hands, eating and eating because the food was stop-shelf. Everybody said so. Top-shelf. People brought random offerings, too. Loaves of bread. Packages of chips, salsa, cookies.

You. Are. Invited. That’s part of what we’re doing here today on All Saints, inviting those who have gone before to be with us now, surrounding us as we worship. We talk to them like regular people.

You're invited. Be here with us. They are always here, of course, bidden or unbidden, always encircling us. But it's on All Saints that we as Christians proclaim and bathe ourselves most lavishly in the gift of the "communion of saints" – that tightly knit, uninterrupted flow of humanity – the iconic and the ordinary, the lofty and the simple, the famous and the family – all of the saints and souls who have gone before, who surround us, claim us, pray for us, support us, maybe protect us, cheer us on. The veil between "us" and "them" is at its sheer-est on this Feast Day, as the saints whisper in our ears: *you are not alone. We are here.* We, the living, are full members of that communion. We, the living, each of us, without a single exception, woven into the fabric of eternity, one seamless garment, unending, unbroken.

A second vision, this one of comfort and assurance, strangely from the fantastical and fiery Book of Revelation. Imagine cowering, terrified, distressed communities of faith two generations after Jesus' death and resurrection. It was a life lived in fear and trembling, always on the run, never sure. It was the life inflicted upon them by the emperor Diocletian (die-uh-**klee**-shn) on the early Christians who wrote and preserved Revelations. These were the early saints of the church, brothers and sisters in the faith, risking all they had for the sake of a name – the name of Christ, which they knew was above all other names, including the name of the emperor himself. For Diocletian, what was at stake was a matter of state control, which necessitated a total chokehold on the religious imagination. He would rule their hearts and their minds, with his steely boot pressed against their necks. For these early Christians, what was at stake was their inmost identity, their very tether to the living God, to the life-giving Good News of Jesus Christ.

The Book of Revelation is understood to be a letter to 7 early Christian churches spanned out across Asia, written by John of Patmos. The island Patmos sits in the midst of the Aegean (uh-**jee**-uhn) Sea and in the time of John was a Roman penal colony and John is believed to have been imprisoned there. From his captivity John receives a stream of visions from God: end of the world visions punctuated by plagues, trumpets, dragons, and beasts, and prophetic visions – the majestic arrival of justice for the suffering and the suffering and the persecuted. Into this letter John pours his imagery – food for the starving and the suffering.

Imagine what John's visions must have been received by those terrified people across Asia. Imagine what it must have meant to them in that most desperate, frightening of times. John's visions lay out for the suffering people not a creation story, not an Alpha story, but an Omega story – a beatific vision of God's end-game. In the Book of Revelation, John's metaphors of great battles between good and evil culminate in its last two chapters, with its golden streets and pearly gates – the place most Christians think of when we think of heaven, where death will be no more – no more tears, no more crying, no more pain. The seven plagues are all over; all the trumpets have been blown. Michael has defeated the Dragon and the Beast has gone down to the dust. And behold, there is rejoicing in heaven as the new Jerusalem comes down out of heaven prepared as a bride adorned for her husband, and all the saints of God make their way to the marriage supper of the Lamb.

There's a reason we entertain John of Patmos' visions on All Saints' Sunday. Because John's is an Omega story – not an Alpha story about the beginning, but an Omega story about the end. And in the end, we learn an essential promise, an essential belief: there is only more life. Even in the end, God promises more life. In John's vision we see that people do not go up to heaven; heaven comes down to them. The earth is not struck by a rogue meteor, laid waste by aliens, destroyed by pandemic, or tortured to death so that humans have nowhere to go but up, like steam escaping a cosmic forest fire.

That is Hollywood, not Revelation. In Revelation, the same God who created heaven and earth the first time is pleased to create them both anew. The new Jerusalem comes down to rest on the same footprint where the old, troubled city once stood, and God comes too – joining humans right where they are. “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them...” In this vision of final destination, the arc of the divine bends down, not up.” In God ours is an unending cycle of life, death, and more life.

And finally, a third vision. This one, of me – a seminarian at Harvard Divinity School with a summer job with the Schlesinger Library at Radcliffe. What was initially needed was a jack-of-all-trades – I answered the phones, checked out books, shelved books, made copies, helped people find things. But then, a few weeks in, I was asked to switch gears and assist in working on a piece of the Pauli Murray collection. Murray was a lawyer and a human rights activist, a college professor and legal scholar, a writer and a poet, gay and non-binary, and the first African American woman to be ordained priest in the Episcopal Church. Educated at Howard and Yale, Murray was (and is) revered for her keen wit, and a before-her-time legal brilliance that seeded later courtroom victories for civil rights tried by the likes of Thurgood Marshall. Her papers had been established at the Schlesinger Library in the 1970s – but twenty-five years later the library was still receiving boxes of papers from family and legal and collegiate colleagues to add to the collection. That summer I sat in a windowless room with overhead fluorescent lights wearing white gloves so as not to soil the gold mine of papers, pulled one-by-one from a cardboard mailer. Day after day I sifted through personal, hand-written notes and official correspondence on onion skin typing paper, sorting them into piles designated by the collection’s curators. It took me forever because I read everything, not content to simply scan and sort and pile. While I barely understood at the time the incredible opportunity I had been offered in handling those papers, and their passionate historical import, I had inklings, at some deep level, of their magnificence. Murray was prolific and voracious and literary. She counted among her personal friends Eleanor Roosevelt and Langston Hughes. She was undeterred in her legal advocacy for people of color – which began 15 years before Rosa Parks ever refused to move to the back of the bus. She was a poet, “Hope is a crushed stalk between clenched fingers,” she wrote. “Hope is a song in a weary throat.”

There was little doubt as to why Murray is counted among, and venerated as, an “official” saints of the Episcopal Church. But she was far from perfect. In the notes I sorted, and through reading and research I engaged about Murray later – hers was a tortured life in many respects. She suffered from loneliness, and depression as she forged her way through a white man’s world, for many decades committing herself to psychiatric units for a time every, single year. She struggled in isolation with identity and her sexuality – 80 years before words like “binary” and “transgender” became part of a collective vocabulary or understanding. Pauli put herself forward for the Episcopal priesthood, after her long-time companion died from cancer without access to anointing and last rites.

Murray was gifted and brilliant, a work horse of intellect and voice, all mixed in together with pain and heartache, confusion and breakdown. What I learned sitting in that stuffy conference room that summer was that though believed to be a saint, she was also just a person. And that her personhood did not denigrate or compromise her sainthood. In fact, it solidified it. When we venerate the saints, what we celebrate is our belief in a God who gets redemptive and holy things done in this world through, of all things, human beings. It has been my experience that what makes saints of God is not the ability to be saintly, but rather God’s ability to work through us. “The title ‘saint,’” as one theologian put it, “is

always conferred, never earned.” Or as the good St. Paul puts it, “For it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”

On this All Saints’ Sunday, we find ourselves in a troubling, exhausting, confusing, arguably antagonistic time. As we begin to emerge from pandemic we are discovering, as our bishop reminded us at our virtual diocesan convention this weekend, that we emerge having suffered, and a struggle like that leaves its mark on all of us. But we are followers of Jesus Christ, who hold at the core of our belief the promise of the communion of saints – who surround us, bidden or unbidden, comfort and encourage us, who raise up for us not models of perfection but examples of what is possible when God works through us. When words elude and there are only visions and stories to uphold us, the saints come marching in, proclaiming the eternal truth that where God is concerned there is only life and more life. An unending cycle -- the Alpha, Omega, and Alpha again – creation, death, and resurrection – with only the thinnest of veils between us and God’s heavenly chorus. Amen.

Sources:

LaRose, Louise Erdrich, pp. 367-8.

Feasting on the Word : Year B, Volume 4, David L. Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor (eds)., pp. 230-235.

Sermon at the National Cathedral, November 4, 2012, Barbara Brown Taylor (on National Cathedral website)

My Name is Pauli Murray, documentary available on Amazon

Harvard Radcliffe Institute and Schlesinger Library, Pauli Murray collection,

<https://www.radcliffe.harvard.edu/schlesinger-library/collections/pauli-murray>