

<i>Date Preached</i>	01-Nov-2020	<i>Date Initiated</i>	20-Oct-2020
<i>Where Preached</i>	SAK	<i>Appointed Readings</i>	ASD, Yr A
<i>Main Text</i>			

" Give us grace ... to follow your blessed saints in all virtuous and godly living. "



It is no exaggeration to say that I wrote the first draft of this sermon back in January, in response to a question on this year's General Ordination Exam that asked us to write the sermon we'd preach on this final Sunday before the 2020 general election, which would also be All Saints' Day. As I turned, a few weeks ago, to writing *this* sermon, however, I saw little use in going back to look. Such have been the arc and the ache of this year ... I cannot be the only one among us who cannot wait for it to end ... that the current world bears little resemblance to the one that existed when I wrote that sermon ten months ago.

Think about it: In early January, the Democrats were still running a conventional primary—remember the Iowa caucuses?; the President was gearing up for a fairly traditional campaign, although his Senate impeachment trial still loomed; the economy was firing on all cylinders. And then, COVID ... a worldwide pandemic of a novel virus that no one knew anything about—either its transmission or its prevention and treatment—that rapidly swept through China, Europe, the United States and onto most of the rest of the world. We were plunged into social lockdown, economic chaos and a period of universal fear and uncertainly the length and depth of which we are unlikely to know again in our lifetimes—God help us—and that continues to hamper, if not upend, almost every aspect of our collective existence: as individuals ... families ... a parish ... a community ... a nation ... a world. Some of us saw our responsibilities mushroom and grow even harder ... and others of us have found ourselves confined and isolated.

And then a summer of violence and protest ... of outrage and rioting ... stemming from a legacy of Black chattel slavery that this country has yet to reckon with head-on. Hurricane and wildfire seasons like none in recent memory, with untold devastation. An unexpected vacancy on the Supreme Court. And on it goes. No, nothing I wrote that afternoon in my cozy dorm room back early January would have much relevance now. That was then, this in now.

And, I am pastorally compelled to acknowledge, the times could get even *different-er* over the coming days. We are on the brink of an election unlike any in memory. I deeply and sincerely pray for us to be spared any extended period of uncertainty, during which passions would be flamed even further, existing political chasms deepened and fundamental trust in our common democracy eroded, perhaps irreparably. And, the truth of the matter is that no matter how or when this election cycle comes to an end, a significant portion of the U.S. population will be disappointed, if not aggrieved ... and we will need to reckon with *that*, too.

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And so, we gather this morning ... in the midst of this swirl and chaos ... to celebrate All Saints' Day. Saintliness doesn't get much play in our times. Living for others and not for self ... sacrificing what's dear to us for the sake of others ... giving up things earthly to propagate things

spiritual ... these are not values consonant with our consumerist culture. Jesus' call—His foremost teaching in the Beatitudes—is saintliness. "Blessed"—that is, saintly—"are the meek ... those who hunger for righteousness ... who are merciful ... who are peacemakers ... who are persecuted for righteousness' sake." To follow Christ is to aspire to live as a saint.

Our tradition is replete with models of saintly living. Tomorrow, All Souls' Day, we will commemorate all Christians ... including those beloved to us ... who have died *in* the faith; into the arms of Christ ... may they ☩ rest in peace. Today, however, we specifically celebrate all those Christian saints—both those known to the Church and those known only to God. All those who have died *for* the faith: a selfless, life-giving biological death as a martyr, like St Stephen's stoning or the Martyrs of Memphis in the 1870s... or a selfless, life-giving spiritual death through a sacrifice of living, like Mother Theresa's relentless ministry to the poor in Calcutta or St Francis' chosen poverty. For millennia, the saints of the Church have chosen to drown themselves in the surging, seething waters of this world's chaos ... and, as we just heard from St John, they have risen again in glory, to stand before the throne of Christ.

Drowning in the waters of death ... and rising again into glory: This should remind of us something. For that is *exactly* the image of our baptism into the life of Christ and His Body, the Church. Although these days we often rather anemically drip a few drops of water on an infant's forehead from a font more a work of art than a swiftly flowing river ... still ... the action of baptism—the *thrust*—is our being cast into the waters and drawn back up again: of renouncing our allegiance to sin and being carried, irrevocably, into the arms of Christ. Our baptisms echo the choices the saints have made: To be baptized is to decide to turn our backs on the earthly cares of this life ... and live out the *eternal* cares of all-loving Christ.

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We're up to our eyeballs in the *swirling chaos* aspect of baptismal saintliness, aren't we? We are practically drowning, it seems, in worldwide disease, disruption, uncertainty and apprehension. Being so close to touching bottom, to sinking in conflict and sorrow, we are compelled to ask: What is the *upward* path? How can we seek to rise again ... not yet into our eternal *heavenly* sainthood, but into the glory of the saintliness Christ calls us to in *this* life?

Again, our baptisms show us the way: In the same sacrament that washed us clean of all sin ... that made sure the world's chaos will not forever defile us ... we made several vows.

- As baptized Christians, we renounce evil and commit to Christ, come what may, to bring this world closer to the ideal of the God Who created it.
- We profess unshakeable belief in the being and ongoing activity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Whose providence and care are our common hope.
- We pledge to be in fellowship, to worship and to pray, and to let the *outgrowth* of these acts color our every other act.
- We forswear evil and when, inevitably, we fall into sin, we promise to repent, which is both to acknowledge our flawed humanity ... and prevent its flaws from destroying the whole world.

- We promise to proclaim the Good News of Christ in what we say to others ... and what they see us do:
to model for others what *we* see in the pattern of Christ.
- We dedicate ourselves to loving and serving Christ "in all persons,"
which is to reject the idea that any lives are expendable or less worthy than any others ... or that there simply isn't enough good in this world to go around.
- We take up a striving for justice and peace for all and a respect for the "dignity of every human being";
to actively right, and not just passively lament, the errors and oppressions we observe, so that all may be free to attain their God-given potentials.

Like other vows—marriage or ordination come to mind—our baptismal vows are aspirational. We will attain them only partially ... and even then, only with God's help. But still, in our striving to live them out, we conform our lives to the paths of the saints. And in so doing, we brush up against our *own* saintliness, as well.

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Our baptisms both *seal* us, fully and forever, in the eternal assurance of Christ's love, glory and salvation ... and *birth* us into the messy and laborious daily life of Christ on earth. The blessedness we are given and the saintliness—the virtuous and godly living—we aspire to grant us, whether or we are aware of it, the wisdom and courage for the facing of these days. Because I can't know how each one of us conceives of these days ... both those behind us and those ahead ... I cannot end this sermon with an assurance and a call for these troubled and troubling times that is personal to you.

But you can, my friends. You know what is in you hearts and minds, and you also know, through baptism, all you have been given ... and all you have been called to do, in the face of the contention, contagion and confusion that confront us. And so, I would like to conclude in silence. I invite each of us to ponder or to pray, for a moment, the fears or angers or laments that we hold inside us this season and conjoin them with the hope and the duty of our baptisms, and let Christ give us a path for 'saintly living' in the days and weeks ahead.

[*minute of silence*]



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