

November 4, 2018
All Saints Sunday
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I don't know what will happen when we die.

Among Christians, there is more than one theory, all based on what's in the Bible. Some believe that it has all been predestined – who will go to heaven and who will not. Others believe that it has something to do with how good you've been, but as Lutherans we teach that it is all about the grace of God. We don't know what will happen, but we believe that Jesus died for our sins and that because God is so loving and good, we will be with God after we die.

But I really don't know how it works,

My friend Jane, who is a Lutheran pastor in Illinois, believes that we will all go to heaven together. She doesn't think that some are there now and some will go later. She believed that at some point, we'll all go together Which means that she believes that her mother, who died when Jane was a girl, is in her grave until the time comes when the faithful will rise to be with God. Some believe that this means we will need our bodies. I am of the mind that if I need my body after I die, God can work it out whether I am buried or cremated or set out to sea. I don't worry about that particular detail, but we don't know what will happen.

It's mostly guessing on our part with some clues and hints from Jesus and the prophets, but I like to imagine that there's a parade.

I like to think that when the saints go marching in- it will be one glorious long parade. But there won't be any floats covered with flowers or tissue paper. We won't need those, but I do think there will be music. Brass bands and big bass drums. Strolling minstrels and string quartets. Guitars and banjos and harmonicas. And chorus after chorus of joyful voices.

I suppose that there will be baton twirlers and flags waving. Banners and streamers. And in the parade of my imagination, there is lots and lots of dancing. Waltzes and polkas and jigs. Hip hop and bee bop and break dancing. But even with all of that color and noise and motion, the thing that you notice most about this parade is the faces. So many faces- different colors and shapes and sizes. All streaming towards the city of God. Faces that beam with joy and love. And yet even as they have that common look of joy in their eyes, each face is unique. Each face tells its own particular story.

There are the faces of those who have come to find rest. They were so tired. They didn't even know how exhausted they were - how fatigued. They have fought the good fight. They have run a good race. But the final days of their journey have made them weary. They have been relying on another's strength. They have been dependent on God's mercy just to make it through the day. But now, now there is a spring in their step and a feeling of lightness all about them. They are so happy to be home.

And as they march in the parade, there is a look on their faces of pure joy.

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As the saints go marching in there are faces that look too young to be there. They still had so much to do. If you look at the calendars that they left behind you would find appointments to keep, birthdays to celebrate and chores to be finished. There are children to raise and lovers to love. There are parents and sisters and brothers who expected something oh so different.

And yet, for some reason that none of us can comprehend- or perhaps for no reason at all- they aren't here with us now. Instead they've joined the parade. And as hard as it is to say goodbye, if you could see their faces, you would see a look of pure joy.

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As the bands play and the angels sing, there are some who are surprised to be there. They lived their lives trying to believe in God. And yet there were times when they had tough questions. They had doubts. They weren't quite sure. They had big doubts that got in their way for years. Little doubts that nagged at them from time to time.

And yet now they are pleasantly surprised to find that the promise was true. They really didn't have to do anything that was special or important. They didn't have to get it all right. God really does love them just the way they are and now they have their place in the parade. And as the saints go marching in, every so often you'll see a face that's a bit surprised to be there, but it is a face filled with pure joy.

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There are some faces in the parade that seem too young to be there. When you see them marching along next to grandmas and grandpas, it's hard not to wonder what those little ones are doing in that parade. They are the ones who although they were here for what seemed like only a moment- we miss them oh so much. We ache for them and we wish they were here. And yet I know that this parade is also for those dear children. God has a lap for them to sit in and a hug to wrap them tight. And as they march with folks who love them, their faces are aglow with a look of pure joy.

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On this day we are called to remember the saints who have gone before us. To remember those who are leading the way in that glorious parade. And in remembering them we find the gift of the gospel. Because you see, unlike a lot of other parades- the parade of the saints is going somewhere. There is a destination clearly in sight.

In the book of Revelation, John describes it as a beautiful city shimmering with the glory of God. Shining like a precious jewel. It is a place of lightness. A place of beauty. A place with no locked doors. It's a city. A great big, enormous city with room for everyone. There is a place for everyone in the city of God. And when you get there, you'll find there is no temple. There is no church building in the city of God. Because in that city, God is the temple. God is the church. God's very self is fully present. Close enough to see. Close enough to touch. You don't have to go looking for God because God is there.

That's the place where the parade is headed. The Holy City of God and in fact, the front of the parade is already there. The celebration has already begun. The bands are playing at the gates of the city. The dancers are wending their way through the streets. And we, we are at the other end of the parade. For this is a parade of all the saints. This is a march for all of God's children. And there is a place reserved for each of us. A place made ours not by anything special we've done. Our place in the parade is ours because in baptism, Jesus has made us his own. And he calls us to come and follow him. Follow him into the city. Knowing that it is our home. Our true home.

It is as Paul says, "our glorious inheritance." It is our hope and God's promise.

It is the place where all blessings come true. The hungry are filled.

Grief is ended and tears are no more.

It is the place that will bring to your face a look of pure joy.

Oh when the saints, go marching in. Oh when the saints go marching in. Oh Lord, I want to be in that number. When the saints go marching in.