



# ST BART'S

A Sermon by  
The Right Reverend Dean E. Wolfe, Rector

## For All the Saints...

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, November 5<sup>th</sup>, 2017*

*The Sunday after All Saints—Based on Revelation 7:9-17; 1 John 3:1-3; Matthew 5:1-12*

I don't know how you return to your ordinary life after you've heard the sound of the screaming. I don't know how you return to your ordinary life after you've heard the sickening sound of metal crushing bone. How can anything be the same after you've witnessed a truck strike pedestrians and bicyclists before finally plowing into a school bus?

I don't know how we do it, but we do. We return to our lives. We are survivors, you and I. We've figured out how to survive, physically and spiritually, terrorist tragedies so horrific we refer to them only in shorthand. 9/11. Boston. San Bernardino. Orlando. Las Vegas. In the strange calculus of terrorism, these acts of terror kill comparatively few people but the fear—literally, the “terror”—on the other hand, affects everyone.

Last Tuesday's tragedy now feels like it happened a long time ago because we need to be able to continue on with our lives and avoid being held captive by images of carnage and death. When I received the terrible news, it didn't keep me from going on to my dinner appointment and going about the rest of my day. Like many of you, I was almost surprised when I received texts from friends from out of town wondering if I was okay. Most of us—almost all of us—live our days as if we will never die. Perhaps it's the way human beings are designed. We take the bike path. We attend concerts. We go to work. We attend school. We meet one another in restaurants and bars. We run marathons.

But the fear never goes away. With the end of Daylight Savings Time, the days grow suddenly short. The sun makes that quick arc across the sky, and when the long night comes, the darkness feels all the more absolute. It's the darkness that prompts us to wonder what lies beyond the thin rim of light. It's the darkness that reminds us that we are mortal and finite. If we don't fear the Christian “death” which serves as a mere transitional moment for the faithful to make their way from mortal life to Eternal Life, then we fear another, more permanent darkness. Dante's vision of Hell, complete with its fiery pits and bituminous pools, pales in comparison to a hell described by the absence of God: a final darkness (more cold than hot) through which no light can pierce nor love revive, a circumstance chosen by those who, in the ultimate encounter with God, utilize their free will to say “no” to God's amazing grace. You can always say “no.”

So we turn to humor to meet our anxieties, the most formidable tool in the human arsenal. A homeless character in a play that starred Lily Tomlin exclaimed, “Why is it called ‘prayer’ when you talk to God and ‘schizophrenia’ when God talks back to you?” Good question. At this time of year, we diminish the Great Unknown in a festival of costumed ghouls and grinning pumpkins and hope to make a mockery of our anxiety. That Halloween has evolved into the second largest commercial holiday of the calendar year should come as no surprise to those of us who know our culture is mortally afraid of death. Of course, using traditional religious holidays to trivialize that which makes us most uncomfortable is actually a practiced pattern.

- We struggle with eternal life, and so the feasts of All Hallow's Eve, All Saint's, and All Faithful Departed morph into a children's festival with candy, ghosts, and goblins and an adult festival with too much to drink.
- We struggle with an Incarnate God, enfleshed and human, and so Christmas morphs into a schmaltzy mix of nostalgia and frantic consumerism.
- We struggle with the Resurrection: the final triumph of Life over Death, and so Easter morphs into a burst of bunnies, candy, and spring fashion.

Please don't misunderstand. It's not that I dislike holidays; in fact, I love them all. I enjoy trick-or-treating, Christmas shopping, Easter egg hunts: all of it. (My wife believes I have never met a Christmas decoration that I didn't like. Which is a nice way of saying she doesn't think I have good taste. But that's a conversation for another day.) But what I fear is that our holy days—our hol-i-days—are subtly being drained of the very significance and meaning that infuse them with life... and then offer us no significance and meaning in return.

All Saint's Day, a principal feast in the Church Year, has been eclipsed by what was intended to be a minor prelude to the primary composition. All Saint's is the grand celebration of the triumph of eternal life over death for the faithful, a reminder that those who put Christian believers to torturous deaths won only a single battle, and not the final victory. The victor's crown goes "to all the Saints, who from their labors rest." There have always been, in every generation, saints: Christians of extraordinary virtue, who were well known for living deeply spiritual lives in the faith.

But the Christian community has also understood that there were other extraordinary Christians who were known to God alone, people whose lives burned so brightly that the darkness was pushed back against the far horizon. Fierce lovers of God who, with a consuming passion, believed their lives were gifts from God to be given away in the name of God and for God's sake. The beautiful ancient hymn asks,

"Who are these like stars appearing,  
these, before God's throne who stand?  
Each a golden crown is wearing;  
who are all this glorious band?  
"Alleluia! Hark, they sing,  
praising loud their heavenly king."

In the year 2017, if we measure a life span at an average of fifty years, we stand some forty lifetimes away from the life of Jesus of Nazareth. Roughly forty lifetimes have come and gone. Forty generations have passed on what it is that we know, what we believe, about the Christ, the Son of the Living God. Two thousand years seem like an amazingly long time, but we can comprehend forty lifetimes—forty men and women, none of whom enjoyed the privileges we enjoy as Americans living in the year 2017.

One can begin to understand the crucial role each of these torch-bearers played in passing down the Christian faith. Probably Semitic people at first and then, later, people from Rome. Some from Africa or Egypt or Turkey and, later, people from Europe. Missionaries sent to India, China, Japan, and around the world. All of them constantly at the mercy of sickness and disease. Christians fighting tyrannical rulers and governments. They kept on with little save their irrepressible belief that God was with them. Many of the forty made their living by raising crops and livestock; others gave birth and raised children. Perhaps there were a few skilled trades people, folks who could read or write, people who could fix things or build things. For generations, they simply kept sharing their faith with the next generation, not only by their words, but by their deeds. Some became Christians because they observed the way in which their Christian neighbors faced death. They suffered, going without water and sometimes without food. They were humiliated for the faith, imprisoned and tortured. They returned again and again to the Word of God. They gathered together for fellowship not only out of their love for one another, but out of their need to be assured they were not alone. They doubted, and they faltered, and sometimes they stopped believing altogether, wondering why God had abandoned them. Then they picked up their crosses and continued on. They were exploited, they

struggled for justice, they yearned for peace, and they died one after another, some without a burial and others without so much as a kind word. And so they brought the faith to someone's great-great grandparents. And then someone handed the possibility of Christian faith to you.

Now we—this generation of privilege, we, the inheritors of all that they sacrificed—are called upon to remember these honored dead: all these Saints, these soldiers of the Cross. They were those who mourned. They were the meek. They were the ones who hungered and thirsted for righteousness. Blessed. Blessed. Blessed are they, for their reward is great in heaven. So, how can our lives be measured against, “so great a cloud of witnesses?”

Lionel Basney writes, “The question is, have you met whatever you take to be non-negotiable... God, the divine, death, the ultimate ground of being... and held the encounter until the Other declared its name? Those who are awakened to the light, ask passionately the question of ultimate reality.... Whatever interior movement it is that occurs in conversion, that small, deeply cut turning of a corner, it is a moment when one has no choice and one's choice is free.i”

A moment when one has no choice, and one's choice is free.

If we surveyed this congregation this morning, we would find more than a few of us have met famous people, people of great accomplishment: Presidents, statesmen and women, business leaders, judges, writers, poets, actors, singers, and athletes. But every one of us has known quiet, unassuming people whose lives themselves were a living Sermon on the Mount, whose every breath was a testimony that God lives and reigns supreme, whose light illumined everyone and everything they touched, whose passionate faith pushed back the darkness.

Saints. Truly, Saints. Who remind us that even in the face of terrorism and unspeakable evil, there is a light and a hope and a truth.

*Amen.*

i **Christian Century**, March, 2010, by Lionel Basney