

**Pastor John Saethre**  
**SAINTS ABOVE – SAINTS BELOW**  
**Revelation 21:1-6a**

It's good to worship with you on this All Saints Sunday! It's a sacred opportunity to commemorate those faithful believers who have gone before us. Some of you have lost loved ones this past year, and you grieve their loss, but are strengthened by the fact that Jesus has conquered our worst enemy, death itself and has given to us a new and living hope, that because He lives, we too shall live! We shall be reunited with those who have gone before us in the faith. And, in a mysterious way, we are united with the host of heaven as we worship today, and that should give us comfort.

We celebrate those who shared the love of Christ in our lives, by word and deed. We talk a lot about the importance of discipleship. Who discipled you in the Christian faith? I have flashbacks of my childhood as a pastor's son – all those sermons I thought I would never remember as I was squirming in the pews– some of those illustrations from God's Word remain forever. I remember my mother teaching Sunday School when my Dad was a chaplain in the Air Force in England. It was a bare base (Chelveston AFB) being reconstructed after World War II, and I remember before chapel, my mom taking out the Sunday School material and teaching about Jesus in this makeshift classroom, three students, myself, my sister Renee, and someone else. What memories do you have, of parents praying with you before bedtime; those Sunday School teachers; those faithful pastors along the way; those friends who spoke the truth to you when you were headed in the wrong way? Thank God for these saints!

But this is ALL Saints Sunday. . . and this is where, in our false humility, we have problems. We often hear, “Well, I'm no saint, but. . . “ We don't want to be seen as holier-than-thou. We don't like that label, so we refuse being called a saint. But we are. . . Luther's famous latin phrase depicts who we are as Christians: *simul justis et peccator* – we are at one and the same time, both saint and sinner. Now, there is a certain denomination of Christians who say we are no longer sinners – I have a problem with that – just ask you husband or wife, and they'll tell you! But I think for most of us we can accept the fact that we are sinful and unclean. But to be a saint, now that's quite a different matter!

I had a hard time convincing Mick that he was a saint. Mick was the Chief of Police at a small base I was stationed at in Germany. He walked around that place like he had a chip on his shoulders. Heavy smoker, a reddish tinge to his nose and face – he looked like he could bite your head off! I felt he was unapproachable. But he came to my office one day. He said he was a son of a Baptist minister from Grass Valley. He admitted straying from the church and his faith. He married a German, had two kids and got a divorce. His life was a mess. He didn't know what to do. He broke down in tears. But that was the start of his renewal in Christ. He started to come to chapel and took my Divine Drama course. Later, he came to me after a service and said, “I don't understand that bit about us being saints. I still slip once in a while and cuss on the job. I don't live an exemplary lifestyle like I should.” I explained it's not what we do that makes us saints. It's the blood of Jesus who washes away our sin; it's Jesus who forgives and makes us holy – that's a saint – a holy one. Luther said we are at one and the same time, both saint and sinner as long as we live on this side of eternity and in the Christian faith. A few years ago, Mick called me and we had lunch together in Fresno, getting caught up. He's remarried to a neat Christian woman and is teaching the Divine Drama at his church in Sierra Vista, Arizona. He's living the abundant life in Christ – as a saint of God.

“Saint” means “holy ones” - set apart. Not set apart as some pious superstars, but as St. Paul says in Ephesians 2:10, *We are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works.* Probably the best

definition comes from a grandma sitting next to her grandson in church. And the little boy marvels at the stained glass windows as asks his grandma, “Grandma, who are all those people in the windows?” “Why those are the apostles,” she said. “Who are apostles?” the little boy asked. “Why those are saints who let the light shine through.” Saints who let the light shine through. Remember that Sunday School song, “This little light of mine, I'm going to let it shine.” That's what you and I do – let the light and hope of Jesus shine through us in this very dark world.

The next thing I want to say about this All Saints Sunday, is that we have a home in Jesus, and that Heaven is a PLACE for all saints. Jesus saved His best words for His friends, His disciples on the night of His betrayal: *Let not your heart be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, I would have told you that I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go to prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.* Friends, this is no hoax – Heaven is a place of eternal intimacy with our God and our Lord Jesus Christ.

We don't talk a lot about Heaven – we're like the TV series years ago: “Heaven Can Wait.” I like this American Dream too much to think about the afterlife. For some, we can't imagine anything better than what we've got right now, but for others, the concept of a place where there is no more suffering is a wonderful hope to cling to. My Father's house is real, and an eternal gift of salvation. The song: “I can only imagine,” tries to get at what it will be like, but we can only guess – it's far beyond our imaginings.

There are so many misconceptions of Heaven: It is not: an abstract idea, some mythological never-never-land; or an artist's concept of celestial beauty; or a musician's theme for a symphony; or a fearful person's imaginative escape from harm. For some, heaven is an eternal golf course. Luther said this about Heaven: we'll be surprised when we get to Heaven; first that we are there in the first place; and secondly to see who's there with us.

The closest we can come to understanding what this Place is like is to see it as a place of INTIMATE FELLOWSHIP with the Lord. Bishop John made that point at our retreat. The goal of us in discipleship is intimate fellowship with Jesus. It's about ABIDING IN JESUS. That's the understanding of the words, “many rooms,” or “abodes” where we find the verb, “to abide.” We're going to abide in Jesus in Heaven. The call then is to learn to abide in Jesus on this side of eternity!

We have a home in Jesus as His saints. There was a bagpiper who was asked by a funeral director to play at a grave-side service for a homeless man. He had no family or friends, so the service was to be at a pauper's cemetery in the Kentucky backcountry. The bagpiper was not familiar with the backwoods, so he got lost and, being a typical man, didn't stop for directions. He finally arrived an hour late and saw the funeral guy evidently gone and the hearse was nowhere in sight. There were only the diggers and crew left and they were eating lunch. The bagpiper felt badly and apologized to the men for being late. So, he went to the side of the grave and looked down and the vault lid was already in place. He didn't know what else to do, so he started to play.

The workers put down their lunches and began to gather around. The bagpiper played out his heart and soul for this man with no family and friends. He played like he'd never played before for this homeless man. As he played “Amazing Grace,” the workers began to weep. They wept, he wept, they all wept together. When he finished he packed up his bagpipes and started for his car. Though his head hung low, his heart was full. As he opened the door to his car, he heard one of the workers say, “I never seen nothin' like that before and I've been putting in septic tanks for twenty years.”

As followers of Jesus, we are never lost. We are never homeless. We have a Place. Philippians 3:20 says, *But our citizenship is in Heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ.*

An angel of God gave the Apostle John a mind-blowing vision of what is to come. It was a vision deep in Jewish thought of a New Heaven and a New Earth. The passage in Isaiah 25 prophesied of the Messianic Age, of a feast of rich foods and a banquet of the finest wines. The Sovereign Lord will swallow up death forever and wipe away the tears from all faces. Now, John sees the fulfillment of what Jews had longed for through the centuries – of a New Heaven and a New Earth – and there was no longer any sea. That was huge for an agricultural/nomadic people. The sea was a place of chaos and being separated from the people they loved. No Jew ever wanted to die at sea. All this was passed into a new life where the Holy City, a New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.

This is the God we believe in – the One who comes to us – the One who sent His only Son in human flesh to be one with us and among us, the God-Man, Jesus to take on our world view and redeem it. This is the incarnation: God seeing the world through our eyes, and Jesus showing the world God's eyes. God comes to us, as He always does to love and redeem a sinful world.

A revival preacher told his crowd, “Raise your hands and get a good hold of God!” What really happens is God makes the first move, comes to us and says, “Follow me!” An old gospel hymn says, “Heaven came down and glory filled my soul!” This is grace at its very best – God making all things new. Eden is restored. Ann Graham Lotz says, *In Heaven there will be no more hospitals or funerals, broken homes or broken hearts, broken dreams or broken lives. There will be no more diabetes or Parkinson's disease, heart disease or arthritis, cancer, strokes, or AIDS (or COVID). No more bombs or terrorists or guns in school.* But, she adds, You have to RSVP!

Now God is preparing us as His Bride, the Church, to meet the Bridegroom Jesus in this eternal wedding feast. Can you imagine the greatest joy we will share in seeing the face of God? We need to receive this gift by saying “Yes!”

This Heaven - this abode for saints is real, but I'm here to tell you that Heaven is not just the “sweet by-and-by.” It's not to motivate us so that we become so heavenly-minded that we're no earthly good. I'm here to tell you that Heaven is NOW! In the Gospel of Mark, the very first words of Jesus after His baptism and testing in the wilderness was: *The time has come, the Kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the good news!* As my seminary professor, Lowell Satre would say, “The Kingdom of God is NOW!” and he would clap his hands. We don't have to wait for it – the Kingdom has broken in to our world; it is up to us to receive the Messiah as our Savior. We get a foretaste of Heaven in this life, on this side of eternity, and this is something to celebrate – and we do that every time we gather to worship in Christ's name. Yes, life is veiled because of sin. As Paul says, *We see in a mirror dimly, but some day, face to face.* At least we see in a mirror dimly – we do get a glimpse of Heaven in this life; we do see evidence of God's goodness all around us: the birth of a baby, the joy of family gathering at Thanksgiving, the beauty of a sunset or sunrise, the vastness of the ocean, a shooting star – the evidence of God's glory is all around us.

And when we do gather for worship and celebrate Holy Communion, which we will do shortly, we join with the Saints above who are in the Church Triumphant. We're not just a church located at 5100 Camden Avenue in San Jose, we are joined with ALL the saints above and on earth. What a powerful experience – of being united in celebrating God's goodness and salvation in worship. As we proclaim:

“Therefore with angels and archangels and the company of heaven we laud and magnify Your Holy name.” The whole host of heaven joins with us before the throne most high. Halleluiah! Saints above with saints below. What powerful worship we enjoy!

This is the Truth we proclaim. And this is the calling God has given us to be salt and light in a world of darkness and destruction and chaos. We were rivetted to the TV at the image of the C-17 cargo plane filled with American and Afghan refugees desperately trying to get on board. Some fell as the plane took off. Some were found dead in the wheel well. The Taliban had broken down the perimeter, and people's lives were in jeopardy. 800 people were crammed on board this single plane, hoping to get to America. I see this as a metaphore of the human condition today. People desperately trying to find answers to chaos and human suffering, the erosion of family and things we hold dear, an escape from anihilation of core values in society where good is bad and bad is good. The world is looking for rescue and to find a better life.

The saints of God are set apart for that very purpose – to proclaim the Truth through word and deed, that Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. And to witness His love to a dying world. He is the answer, not only to rescue us from sin, death and the power of the Devil, but to equip us to live in the midst of chaos and need through the power of the Holy Spirit. Paul said we are to be “in the world, not of the world.” That's where God places His saints – where they can do the most good – letting the Light shine through you!

You don't have to be a St. Augustine or a St. Francis and perform miracles to be a saint. I'm sure you can think of people near and dear to you – the unsung heroes of the faith who have brought you closer to God.

During World War II, England needed to increase its production of coal for the war effort. But miners were soon to go on strike. Winston Churchill called together labor leaders to enlist their support and avert a strike that would cripple the nation. At the end of his presentation he asked them to picture in their minds a parade which he knew would be held in Picadilly Circus after the war. First, he said, would come the sailors who had kept the vital sea lanes open. Then would come the soldiers who had come home from Dunkirk and then gone on to defeat Rommel in Africa. Then would come the pilots flying overhead who had driven the Luftwaffe from the sky.

“Last of all,” he said, “would come a long line of seat-stained, soot-streaked men in miner's caps. Someone would cry from the crowd, 'And where were you during the critical days of our struggle?' And from ten thousand throats would come the answer, 'We were deep in the earth with our faces to the coal.’”

You may be that unsung hero – faces to the coal - that grandparent sitting at the kitchen table, praying for the protection and salvation of that wayward grandchild as you fight the good fight of faith as the Church Militant. That's what saints do, most often not a glamorous thing, but being a force for good on this side of eternity.

This All Saints Sunday, we proclaim the victory of our Lord Jesus Christ who makes us all saints through His shed blood on the cross and forgiveness of our sins. He's calling us to be lights to the world that others might be drawn to gaze in the beauty of His holiness forever. A place where *He will wipe every tear from our eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.* Heaven is now and is brought to perfection in the life to come. He is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. Jesus is everything we need. He is our all-in-all.

This is good news this All Saints Sunday – news that needs to be shared. The question is: when the time comes, who are you going to take with you into Heaven?  
Amen