

WGUMC November 4, 2018 All Saints' Sunday  
Isaiah 25:6-9 "A Million Points of Light"

What kind of teacher would let his students go to recess before finishing their math lesson? What kind of parent would let his kid eat chocolate cake for breakfast? And what kind of pastor would let her congregation celebrate the kingdom of God before it ever got here?

I wondered about this as I read this passage from the Prophet Isaiah. I've never preached on this text before, so I've never paid much attention to it. It wasn't until Kaleidoscope on Thursday that I noticed there was something strange about these verses.

When he says, "On this mountain..." I know that the author is talking about the end of time, the coming of God's kin-dom, when God will prepare that heavenly banquet of which we get a foretaste every time we come to the Lord's Table. But I noticed that God is setting the feast for us, with rich food and well-aged wines, in verse 6, before God has done the kin-dom work of verses 7 and 8.

Preparations for this great party are well underway even before God

has gotten around to destroying the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations, and before God has swallowed up death forever. God is sending out the invitations before God has wiped the tears or taken the disgrace away from God's people.

If that seems backward to you, then you were probably raised in the Midwest like me where you always had to finish your work before you got to play. Delayed Gratification: that's my middle name. But we have to be careful because there is a fine line between delayed gratification and eternal ingratitude. So on Thursday, I heard Isaiah telling me that God didn't put off the party until all the work was done. To this old party pooper, God says: "You don't have to wait until the shroud has been completely destroyed, until every sin has been repented, every last wrong has been righted, every sickness has been cured, every tragedy has been averted, and every soul has been resurrected. In other words, do not wait your whole life to celebrate because the Guest of Honor is here right now."

I needed to hear that going into this election. Isaiah reminds me that tomorrow there will be work to do. And no matter what happens on Tuesday, there will be plenty of kin-dom work to do on Wednesday. And even though we're not going to finish that work by Thursday or even Friday, it's important to celebrate the kin-dom today.

I know good Christians who start their week on Monday. That way they think that they can reward themselves at the end of the week and worship God on Sunday. But I say and the Bible says that the week starts on Sunday. After all, the resurrection happened on a Sunday, the first day of the week, according to all four gospels. So we celebrate God not just for getting us through another week but for being the kind of God who is already working miracles for us in the coming week. God, who is eternal—who was and is and ever shall be; who dwells in the past, the present and the future simultaneously—our God is already active in our future lives,

creating new spaces for grace that we won't stumble into until later in this week or next week or the next week....

We pray, "Thy kin-dom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." But we don't have to wait to celebrate. Unbeknownst to us, God is doing great things right now, and that's why we are gathered here today. But how do we hold onto that faith, that hope, through all the other days? This week, how are we going to get through Tuesday?

Here's where the saints can help us. Frederick Buechner defines a saint this way: "In his holy flirtation with the world, God occasionally drops a handkerchief. These handkerchiefs are called saints." [*Wishful Thinking*, p. 83] Saints drop into our world, into our lives to remind us that God is here, Goodness is here. It's just ahead of us, wooing us to follow, and showing us the way.

One of those saints who has been showing me the way is the Archbishop of San Salvador, Óscar Romero. You might remember that he was murdered by right-wing death squads while celebrating

mass in a cancer hospital in 1980. Jesus ministered for three years and then the Romans crucified him. Romero preached for three years and then the soldiers killed him.

It was the way he followed Jesus, the way he advocated for the poor, called out the perpetrators of violence, and accused government officials of injustice, that made the powerful clerics in Rome despise him and accuse him of being more of a communist than a Christian. For that reason, the Church would not recognize him as a martyr until Pope Francis came along. Coming from Latin America, Francis understands the situation there and under his direction, Romero was beatified in 2015 and finally made a saint last month.

But he's been a saint for me for a long time. My very first computer password was "romero," and each time I typed it, I remembered and gave thanks for this humble, courageous saint whose life and witness still gives me hope and strength. He's a big part of the reason why I feel such a responsibility for the homeless

community and why I believe that Jesus meant what he said, that the Gospel has to be good news for the poor or it isn't good news at all.

Who is your patron saint? Who has been the lodestar in your life, helping you set your priorities, find your purpose, navigate through crises big and small? Not every saint is a martyr or officially recognized by the Roman Catholic Church. In fact, in the Bible, "saint" is simply the word the Apostle Paul used for church member. Romero is a big saint, but there are countless little saints among us. We said goodbye to one of them last week.

Harriet Hosack was—and is—a saint of this church. She began singing in the choir when she first joined WGUMC in 1967. When Rev. Wayne Williams was here in the 70's and 80's, she worked as the church's Secretary General. I say that because she was a general. Harriet ran the church with the same authority and efficiency as she operated the old offset printing machine that took up almost the entire workroom. She could do so many things and

she did them well. A friend to many, Harriet was very generous with her time, her talents, and her treasure. Without her big heart, we'd still be repaying the debt on the Woodhaven renovation. I'm sorry that I did not know Harriet in her heyday, but I, for one, will miss our little weekly ritual. I used to say, "It's good to see you, Harriet." And she would answer, "It's good to be seen."

Harriet was not only seen. Her faith was felt. Her joy was shared. Her love was lives. You could say that when Harriet came to this church, God dropped a handkerchief in our lives. Because of her presence among us, we could see God a little more clearly, love God a little more dearly, and follow God a little more nearly, day by day.

Though we cannot see Harriet any longer, we know that she is still with us, because we believe in the communion of saints. We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, and every time we gather around this table, it's as if we were sitting down to a Thanksgiving feast with old friends.

Thursday night, I got the call as I was about to leave the house. A half hour after I got to Merrill Gardens, Steve and Louise, Dale and Lynne walked in. We gathered around her bed, sang some hymns, said a prayer. At five o'clock the next morning, our sister in Christ joined the communion of saints.

Harriet's star is set in the heavens. Now she is one of many millions of points of light that can guide us through this very dark night. Despite all evidence to the contrary, the kin-dom is coming. There is a lot of work to do yet, but God has already sent out the invitations to the feast. Oh there is still a shroud covering the people. This year, it's a shroud of anger, fear and division. There is still a sheet spread over this nation. For this election, it's a sheet of bigotry, violence, and voter suppression. But because we believe in the communion of saints, we know that this night is not devoid of stars. If we look up, we'll see that they are shining brightly for us. I am wooed by their love and moved by their faith, so let me be the



kind of pastor who will let her congregation celebrate the kingdom now. Then tomorrow, let's get to work healing the nation.

But let me leave you with the words of Oscar Romero. When speaking on this passage from Isaiah, he talked about the dark night in his own country, the violence, the injustice, and he concluded: "That is not of God. God's banquet will come; wait for the Lord's hour. Let us have faith; all this will pass away like a national nightmare, and we shall awake to the Lord's great feast. Let us be filled with this hope." [*The Violence of Love*, p. 96] And God's people said, "Amen!"