

God of life and death and life again, speak to us today and guide our lives, individually and collectively. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Every year, on All Saints' Sunday, the church takes a moment to pause, in grief and in hope.

This week, I have found myself dwelling deeply in both of those emotions. The grief of losing my co-pastor – not to death, but to a thing we like to call “clergy misconduct” – has weighed heavy on me these past days. At the same time, the strength and leadership and compassion of our staff, council members, and other folks in the Lake Edge community have lifted me up and shown me glimpses of the hopeful future that awaits us.

All Saints' Sunday seems to be the most appropriate occasion to honor the loss and the love that I have felt this week, and that I know we will all continue to feel in the coming days and months.

So let's start with a brief reflection on the meaning of All Saints' Day.

The Christian church has been canonizing people – that means declaring them to be saints – for a really long time. The formal saints are people who embodied the Christian faith in exemplary ways, and whose impact continued even beyond their death.

There are a whole lot of saints. And if you were to try to honor the feast day of every single saint, you'd be in worship non-stop, year-round.

So, after several hundred years, the church began observing *All Saints' Day*, to honor all those saints whose feast days were not otherwise celebrated in every faith community.

In the Lutheran church, we believe that all people are both saint and sinner.

When we are baptized, we are received into the communion of saints – baptism is the tangible sign of God's promise of grace to us. We don't get to join in the eternal heavenly chorus until after we have died, but the promise is there from the beginning.

For us, All Saints' Day isn't just about remembering the formal saints, like Francis of Assisi and Mary Magdalene. This is a time to celebrate *all* faithful people, living and dead. This is why we have the practice of remembering by name all those who have been baptized and all those who have died since All Saints' Day last year.

We honor those who are at the very beginning of their lives of faith, and those who are at the very beginning of their eternal lives in God's presence.

Today is an occasion of grief and of hope.

All Saints' Day is particularly poignant for our community this year.

We have had many beloved congregation members pass away since this time last year, and nearly all of us have lost family members and friends. Some of us have lost independence, like the ability to drive, or to live at home alone. This congregation has carried a lot of grief in the past 12 months.

Our nation carries a lot of grief, also. We mourn the increasing loss of life due to mass shootings, hate crimes, and other evil acts. Parents seeking asylum in our country grieve the loss of their children, who were kidnapped from them at the border. Assault survivors grieve the loss of their voices to the louder voices of their attackers.

And today our congregation grieves the sudden loss of a pastor.

It is difficult for us to imagine the faith life of this congregation without Pastor Stephen – without even a chance to say goodbye.

Some of us are in shock this morning at learning the news of Pastor Stephen's resignation. Some of us have known this news for a little longer, but we may still be in shock.

Or we may be angry, or confused, or afraid. We may even feel relieved, or betrayed. It's all ok. Grief takes many different forms and covers the whole range of human emotion.

No matter where we find ourselves this morning, the occasion of All Saints' Day gives us the freedom to grieve, and the freedom to hope.

So take a breath.

Honor whatever causes you to mourn today.

And breathe.

And honor those things that bring you joy today.

The reading from Revelation tells us, "I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away."

The arrival of the new heaven and new earth was cause for celebration!

But the first heaven and the first earth certainly had value, also. And they are not going to be around any more.

God is constantly bringing new experiences and opportunities before us! But that also means we are constantly having to leave behind other experiences and opportunities.

It is ok to wonder what might have been. If we could have had one more day together, one more chance to say what mattered, one more photo, one more memory... How might things be different now, if we could get a do-over?

But we can't dwell there forever. Because we know that we don't get a do-over. We live with the reality that is now before us. Our loved one has entered God's eternal embrace, or a relationship has ended, or an opportunity at something new has passed us by.

The fading of the old heaven and the old earth may be a significant loss.

But look! The new heaven and the new earth are growing closer every moment!

Scripture gives us words of profound hope:

God will destroy the shroud that is cast over all peoples, and will swallow up death forever. The Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces.

Oh, our grief can be intense.

But God's love reaches out to us, and will heal even the deepest wounds.

Our faith promises that we will never have to carry grief on our own, and that it will never last forever. In the end, God's love will always win.

It may not be easy. At times it may feel impossible.

But God's love is stronger than death... stronger than anger, and betrayal, and shock, and loss.

Allow me to share an example.

I have a vivid memory of All Saints' Sunday last year.

Jack G. was here that day, sitting right in the front pew. Jack was a long-time member of Lake Edge, the partner of our organist, Jay, and generally a beloved member of this congregation.

He was weeping in joy and grief during worship. He had been mostly homebound for a long time, and was so glad to be with us that day!

Jack always felt the tangible presence of God in the bread and wine of Communion, and in the music of worship.

Maybe it helped that he had a special relationship with the organist 😊

Jack had hope and trust in God's love and presence, and his hope was visible to those of us who were blessed to be in worship with him.

But last November, Jack also knew that by the time the next All Saints' Sunday rolled around, he was likely to be with us in name and spirit only, and not in his physical body.

And he was right. Along with several other loved ones from this community, I was blessed to accompany Jack through his final earthly days early this summer. But even during those final days, Jack rejoiced in the presence of God. He was grateful for even the smallest gestures of kindness – a prayer, a visit, a song. Somehow, without being self-righteous about it, Jack was able to portray a fearless confidence in God’s promise of love and grace and eternal life. And now he is living out that promise, among the communion of saints.

Jack taught me hope.

And let me be clear – he is not the only one.

I have been blessed to walk with many families through the final journey from this life to the next, and if I were to share all that I have learned from you and your loved ones, and the many ways I have been blessed, we would be here until All Saints’ Sunday next year.

So for Jack, and for all the rest of you who have taught me about hope – thank you. That is the message that we most desperately need today.

God is with us in our joy and our sorrow, and there is nothing we can do to stop it!

The divine presence will insist on accompanying us through every chapter of our life.

This morning, whether we grieve the loss of a loved one, or of our pastor, or of the state of the world, we desperately need hope.

Thankfully, our faith is full of it!

Today’s readings from Isaiah and Revelation remind us of God’s promise for renewal, even when things look bleak.

The story from the Gospel of John has Jesus conquering death in one of the most powerful stories of hope imaginable!

All the saints, for whom this day is named, give us hope for the future.

In the early years of the church, Perpetua and Felicity went fearlessly to be martyred, knowing wholeheartedly that God promised to bring them into eternal life.

Church fathers and mothers retreated to the wilderness, hoping that God’s revelation might be more clear to them there.

Reformers over the centuries brought forward their innovative ideas, hoping against hope to bring the practices of the church into closer alignment with the Word and the will of God.

In recent years, people like Oscar Romero, James Cone, and Mother Teresa spoke out vocally against systems of oppression, always holding on to the hope that God will create a more equitable realm for all God's children to call home.

Our faith has been fed by hope for thousands of years. It is what keeps us going.

The grief still comes.

But the hope must remain.

Our God promises us a new heaven and a new earth, an end to all tears and sorrow, and life even in the midst of death.

We can grieve when we must.

But we will not grieve forever.

“See, the home of God is among mortals.

He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples,

and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes.

Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for the first things have passed away.”

Jesus said, “Unbind him, and let him go.”

God's love is stronger than anger, separation, and even death.

Grief has no final hold on us. Hope will prevail.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.