

Tomorrow, Today—Reflection for 1 November 2020

Revelation 7:9-17; 1 John 3:1-3

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Did you remember to change your clocks last night or were you trying to sign on for church an hour early? I have to confess that, though I appreciate the extra hour of sleep, I have more trust issues around the fall-back time than the spring-ahead time! What if I didn't do it right and turn out to be late? I am almost always up at 2 a.m. and when my digital clocks on the computer and cell phone jump ahead to 3 or fall back to 1, I end up second guessing whether it has happened yet or not and have to go look at an old fashioned clock to see what it says.

Daylight savings is sort of like our ultimate attempt to control time—which is ultimately uncontrollable—and it's actually sort of impressive that we pull it off, that we all manage to get to church at the right time the next day. It's the closest we get to some kind of time warp. I guess it's a little like staying up until midnight on New Year's Eve, when one year turns into the next; when December turns into January, when today turns into tomorrow.

The funny thing about tomorrow, though, is that as soon as you get there, it's today again, right? I ran across a sermon on the internet that refers to a silly song—maybe you know it. Evidently, it was featured on a Muppet Show many years ago—about a small town in southwest Ohio called Morrow (M-O-R-R-O-W), which as you can imagine, leads to all kinds of confusion and lends itself well to all kinds of jokes. They remind me of the Abbott and Castello baseball skit about “Who's on First?”ⁱ

The Muppet song is about someone who is trying to catch a train to Morrow, Ohio, but missed the train going today and so would have to wait and go tomorrow. The song goes on and on, but at one point, the clerk at the train station sings: “For the train today to Morrow if the schedule is right, Today it gets to Morrow and returns tomorrow night.”ⁱⁱ Tomorrow seems to be one of those elusive places we're always looking ahead to, but can't ever seem to get there.

In the musical “Annie,” the title character Annie sits at her window in the orphanage and looks toward tomorrow whenever she’s feeling hopeless, because she knows that there’s always hope, tomorrow.

And John, the writer of the last book of the Bible, wrote the book of Revelation while he himself was in exile on the island of Patmos. He looked out to the destruction in the world around him and looked toward tomorrow and sees a new heaven and a new earth, and hears a voice saying, “God will wipe every tear from their eyes; death will be no more, mourning and crying will be no more, for the first things have passed away... I am making all things new...” Those words are the inspiration for what has recently become one of my favourite hymns, #713 in our red hymnal *Voices United*: “I See a New Heaven.”

Tomorrow... It’s getting from today to tomorrow that seems to be the hard part. Sometimes, doesn’t it feel like we can’t get to tomorrow? We’re like that guy trying to get to Morrow [Ohio], but he can’t, because the train has already left. We’re like Annie, sitting in her orphanage window night after night, dreaming about tomorrow. We’re like John, seeing a vision in which death is no more... But we’re here, in today, in the real struggles of the world, and sometimes tomorrow seems awfully far away.ⁱⁱⁱ

And for some people, the tomorrow toward which they had worked for years, that tomorrow never comes. Moses was one of those people. Since we have been following Moses’ story this fall, I want to refer to the end of his story in this context of “tomorrow” on this All Saints Day. What must it have been like for him, after leading his people out of slavery in Egypt and giving leadership for forty years of wilderness wandering, not to be able to enter the Promised Land with them?

There is a Midrash story made up in response to the puzzlement of why, after all Moses had done to get Israel to this point, he got only a lofty guided tour on Mt. Pizgah, of the land to which he had brought his people. It goes like this, with God speaking ...

“Look, Moses, look out there—how far you can see! See that city right across from us? That is Jericho. See the palm trees? That’s where Jericho gets its

name. One day soon, its walls are going to fall as the people of Israel march around it blowing trumpets.

Look across the plains beyond Jericho—way out there—you can see Zoar. And out there to the north—way over to the Western Sea—that will be called the land of Judah. See the plateau just south of that? That's the Negeb and will be great for pasturing cattle and growing grapes! Oh my, what wine!

'This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying, "I will give it to your descendants"; I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there.' Because I remember how you delighted at what happened to my other children, the Egyptians, who lost all their firstborn sons during the Passover and I remember the smirk of satisfaction on your face as the waters came crashing down on my children the Egyptians after your people crossed the Red Sea on dry ground."^{iv}

The story goes that God buried Moses soon after that conversation, since no one knows his burial place to this day.

Moses was reportedly 120 years old when he died; his sight was unimpaired—or he couldn't have seen all those places God pointed out—"and his vigour had not abated," the scripture reports. Ask me at coffee time what that means, if you can't figure it out.

This story tells us that the tradition of mourning a death for 30 days is very old. And the Israelites DID mourn this giant of a leader. He is truly a hero for both Halloween (a magician!) and to celebrate for All Saints.

As a magician, he was unsurpassed. Who else could throw down his staff to become a snake, then pick up the snake by the tail to become his staff again? Or to control a reverse storm surge with that same wand, so his people could escape from the Egyptian army by crossing the Red Sea on dry land? And those plagues brought on the Egyptians? Wow!

But he was also a true saint, one who knew God intimately, whose wisdom guided the people of Israel for four decades, bringing them back to worship God each time they strayed.

And that is because he knew firsthand about the Greatest Commandment that Jesus quoted so many years later, the one we have talked about several times this fall. The first tablet of the 10 commandments focussed on loving God above all else; the second tablet focussed on loving others. It's something every Jewish person knew intimately. But Moses knew it first, and presented it to the Israelites as their Law from God.

Last week, Rev. Harold told you about two other saints centuries later, who worked wonders of their own. Martin Luther was a medieval monk and priest, whose conscience could not accept some of the practices that had grown up in his beloved (Roman Catholic) Church. So he did something about it and we find ourselves in a reformed church because of his actions and those of Charles Wesley, the Anglican priest who became the father of the Methodist tradition.

Saints separated by thousands of years—Moses, Martin Luther, Charles Wesley—all instrumental in shaping our faith traditions. Deeply human people, not without sin, as Rev. Harold shared last week. But sinlessness is not what defines a saint.

We are all saints. The New Testament writers used the word saint to refer to Christians, who, no matter what our personal sanctity as individuals, are called holy because we are consecrated to God and to following Christ. This usage of the word "saints" is found at least fifty times in the New Testament.

The communion of saints is **all** members of the Christian Church, living and dead, those on earth and in heaven, We are all part of a single "mystical body," with Christ as the head, in which **each member contributes to the good of all and shares in the welfare of all.**

And isn't that what we are called to do as Christians!?

Every year, as a congregation and individually, we look to the past and celebrate what God has done, and we look forward to the future, making plans and building dreams for tomorrow. Today we honour those people we've lost in the last year, and isn't it for them that we look forward? It is because of all the saints who've gone before us, that we are here where we are today and can make plans for the future.^v

Though we are still missing those we've lost, and always will, we can also say, "The Lord has done great things with us!" With God's help, we've served people all over the community in all kinds of ways.

We've donated food and books and bus tickets and grocery vouchers and scholarships to people who need them. With God's help, and the money generously given by the saints among us, we've continued to do these things even during this pandemic. With God's help, we've done behind-the-scenes work on everything from replacing the floors in Peart Hall and renovating the downstairs for a state-of-the-art new Childcare Centre, to preparing administrative policies for when we are able to re-open the church after the renovations and COVID19 allow us to do so. This is the way of the saints.

With God's help, we've gathered for worship in creative and meaningful ways on Zoom. We've cared for each other when times have been rough this past year, we've helped each other grieve, we've celebrated together. We've welcomed new friends. And we will welcome more. This is the way of the saints.

However...However.... Tomorrow is a hard place to get to, and we aren't there yet. There are dreams God has for us that we haven't gotten to yet. And maybe we thought we'd be there by now. Maybe we're starting to feel a little discouraged. Maybe we are anxious about going forward without the presence of some of the saints. Can we just be honest about this? I miss some of them so much, my heart aches.

As we look around, we're much smaller on Zoom than we were a year ago in person, because of the pandemic and so many folks anxious about trying out the technology. And we look around at each other and think about all the dreams we have for the congregation—all that we really truly feel God is calling us to do—and we kind of wonder where all those new people are whom we want to come and do it with us? And if we're really being honest, where are all those new people who some of us wanted to come and help pay for it? But maybe that's not how God works. Maybe there is a new story being woven here.

A year ago, we might be thinking, we were looking ahead to tomorrow and all that we hope for, and now it is tomorrow, or really today, and we're looking ahead to the next tomorrow and wondering how all that is going to

happen. So, yes. We've got some work to do. We will want to be intentional about inviting people, if we think we have something important to share here. Nobody is going to know that unless we tell them. That's the first question we will be addressing at our upcoming Transitional Event: Who are we?

More importantly let's be on the lookout for ways to serve our community. To do that, it's important to know our neighbours, so we can get ready to respond to the second question of "Who are our neighbours," with its implication of "what are they yearning for?" (That is, in addition to the huge gift to the community of the Childcare Centre for which we are preparing.)

As we do this, we will want to think about how we use the gifts of our leaders so that we all don't get so burned out running the organization of the church that we don't have time to BE the church. All this will require committing to each other that we are going to live into the future of this church, and we're going to do it in part for all the saints who did it for us.

The hope God promises us is not just the future hope of banquet feasts of rich food on holy mountains with well-aged wines. I am pretty agnostic about that picture. If it is that, it is also a promise that there is a little bit of tomorrow—our God-promised tomorrow—in our every day.

Yesterday, we stood near the sacred ground of the life of the saint we knew as Bill, whom we loved and honoured. We can hear his voice and some of the voices of others who died since last All Saints Day, calling to us today. These saints call us not only to some heavenly reality but to a faithful tomorrow. Something happens there that moves us from yesterday to tomorrow, and we stand here today, changed by what happens there, because we know, now, that the promise is true. That there is hope, not just for tomorrow, but for today. Thanks be to God!

ⁱ The hilarious script for the skit is at <http://www.cranberryleague.com/Who1st/Who1sts.htm>, accessed on 30 October.

ⁱⁱ Quoted in *Homiletics*, November – December 2009; pg. 10-11

ⁱⁱⁱ "Tomorrow concept" in this sermon relies heavily on a sermon by Rev. Lee Hull Moses, "For All the Saints," in *Celebrating All Saints Day: Resources for Congregational Ministry and Worship*, Rev. Richard J. Hull II, Contributing Author, published by Christian Church Foundation: Helping Disciples Make a Difference, pp 26-28. Accessed on 30 October at <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/58f0d94ccd0f68deb245c6bc/t/5baa6d378165f5b73594a8f7/>

^{iv} This Midrash was reported in a sermon I read years ago, for which, regretfully, I have lost the references.

∨ This whole conclusion relies heavily on Lee Moses' sermon, with gratitude for thoughts that apply to our transitional situation in this pandemic.