

All Saints' Sunday November 1, 2009

What do we see when we look into darkness? There are plenty of dark places out there; what do we see when we look at them? What do we see when we look at the darkness of creation—the vastness of space, the darkness that reaches beyond our vision and our imagination? Or when we look at the darkness of the night, where whatever forces, powers, creatures and fears that lurk just outside of our vision live and prowl? Or when we peek into the hidden, dark, parts of our own lives, to the places we would rather not go? And what do we see when we look into the darkness of the grave, that final, great mystery that never quite goes away? What do we see when we look into the darkness?

Now, our pagan ancestors had some pretty clear ideas about what was out there. They saw evil, angry, hostile, and uncaring creatures and forces—the gods and demons of the dawn of human religious consciousness. They saw critters who were ugly, and mean, and who wished them ill. They saw the grave as the path into nothingness or something worse; and places of the dead as haunted, forbidden, and dangerous. They saw creation populated primarily by enemies—human, divine, and half-divine enemies which would rather hurt than help.

However, as we all know from last night, these enemies could, from time to time be bought off, appeased and briefly satisfied by some sort of bribe—an offering made from fear. If the offering were made, there was a moment of safety. If it were withheld—vengeance would follow. Trick or treat. || That's a part of how it started. By dressing up as ghosts and goblins and demanding protection money from the neighbors, we have tamed and made fun of a dark vision of the world; but we haven't escaped it.

The fact is, we're really not all that far from the campfire at the door of the cave—and from the fear of what waited outside. That vision of reality is sometimes as close as a power blackout or a strange noise.

Then there's another vision of the world, of what we see when we look into the darkness, that is very close to that of our pagan ancestors. We call it scientific, or realistic, but it isn't. This vision of the world tells us that when we look into the darkness around us we see atoms in motion, natural laws, random chance, survival of the fittest, *and nothing else*. It tells us that creation, at its heart, is a cold and dead thing, a series of indifferent, mechanical regularities or meaningless quantum fluctuations, and that we are an accidental by-product of complex chemistry *and nothing else*. The grave is simply the end of the electrical and chemical activity in our brains, and that's all there is. This, we say, is modern. This, we say, is up to date.

The irony is that there's really not much difference between the world view of our pagan ancestors and that of our clever neighbors. They use different names, but both see the forces that govern our world as hostile, indifferent, and dangerous. Both see life and death as determined by powers beyond our control. And both see the heart of creation as uncaring, unconcerned with us or our fate. If either of these views of creation have anything at all to say to us, it is only that old lie, "You're on your own, sucker."

But we Christians are different. We Christians have been given a deeper vision of reality, a different view of creation. And on the Feast of All God's Saints we celebrate several levels of this vision.

One level is captured by the reading from the Wisdom of Solomon where it talks about the "souls of the righteous"—about "saints" in the modern sense of really good people who made a special contribution to our world and to our story. Such remembering is a good and proper thing to do; our faith and our Church owe much to those who have valued their souls and their character more than their lives; and in doing that have left us a lasting legacy. But that is only one part of All Saints' Day.

Even more than that, today is about what the Creeds call “The Communion of Saints”. That means today is about the power of God’s love. For when we speak of the Communion of Saints we speak of the very real bond that unites in Christ all who are joined to him: the great and the not so great; the remembered and the forgotten; the winners and the losers; those we are proud of and those we are not so proud of; the living and the dead—for all who have been joined to the body of Christ are united by him and with him in a bond stronger than life, or death; time or eternity; earth, heaven or hell.

Who we are, St. Nick’s the Church in this place, is but a small flake of *who we are*—as God’s Church, rooted in eternity, forever joined to our Lord and to each other, bearing its final fruit in the holy city, the new Jerusalem. We are part of this glorious company.

This is why, when we Christians look into the darkness—the darkness of the night, of the grave, and the darkness of creation, we, like our Pagan ancestors, see partially known forces of evil, both within us and outside of ourselves, that are trying to pull us apart and destroy us. And, like our clever neighbors, we also see indifferent natural laws and atoms in motion. For these are real and not to be ignored. However, and unlike these others, we see more.

We see beyond these, beyond them to the truth that the most powerful force in all creation and beyond is the love of God; a love that holds us, and cherishes us, and binds us together. We see that at this Altar we approach, not only the presence of God, but also the presence of all of those who have gone before, and yet remain a part of us.

We see that creation itself, as vast, as mysterious, as broken and as ambiguous as it is, creation itself remains, in an ultimate way, loving, and for us.

And we see that death, for all its awful power, is not the greatest power; indeed is far from the greatest power. And so we can, with the grace of God, look toward the darkness, toward all of the darkneses out there and in here, with a hope and a confidence that can be greater than our fear.

In a little while, at our Altar, I will read around 150 names, names that make up a part of the weight our hearts bear each day. These folks are saints, too—the ordinary kind, just like us. And they are part of us. They are part of us by being joined with us to our Lord, by being a part of our lives and our hearts, and, for many, they are also part of us by having been a part of this place.

Also, before I read those names, we will gather at our Font, and we will baptize Sunjay Dylan into Christ's Church, and into our little patch of that Church here in Midland. He will become, in a deeper and more powerful way, a child of God, a member of the Body of Christ, and an heir of the Kingdom of heaven. We will accept and welcome him; and we will promise to help and support him as he shares our stories, and begins to walk our walk.

And in doing these things we will, once more, insist that our vision of creation, the Christian vision of God being all in all, is a vision that we make our own, a vision on which we stake our lives, our death, and even our children.

All of this is what All Saints' Day offers us—a vision of the world that proclaims that the very heart of creation, in a secret and hidden way, beats with an unstoppable love, a love that reaches out to us—from before the beginning to beyond the end—and embraces us eternally.

So we say, every Sunday morning, that we believe in the communion of Saints—that's what we say. That's what we believe; and that makes a difference.