

November 7, 2021
Revelation 21:1-6a

All Saints' Sunday
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“Homecoming”

“See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes.”

My hometown is not my home any longer. I spent the first eighteen years of my life in the same house, in the same neighbourhood, in the same community: 429 Grove Street, North Plainfield, New Jersey. It was the only home I knew until I left for university, and it was the place to which I returned throughout my years of schooling. I can still picture our neighbourhood and the people among whom we lived, as well as all the familiar sites that were a central part of my childhood. One of the most important places in my hometown outside of our house was our home congregation, St. Peter's Lutheran Church. It was the home church of the Laustsen family since 1924; it was the church where I was baptized, confirmed, and ordained. I learned about the love of God in Jesus Christ in Sunday school, sang in the Junior Choir, and preached my first sermon in its pulpit. The faces of the people with whom we gathered for worship are still etched in my mind and live on long after I moved away from Grove Street, from St. Peter's, and from North Plainfield.

The last time I visited my hometown was on All Saints' Sunday in 2009, when it became clear to me that this was no longer my home. Both of my parents had died, and our family home had been sold. As I drove through our neighbourhood, I discovered that few of the people who were my childhood neighbours still lived there; the houses were still standing, but the people who lived in them had changed. Many of the places that were favourite places – the bowling alley, the pizza place at the end of the block, Helen Elliott's Candies (our version of Rheo Thompson) – were gone. My drive through my hometown ended when I arrived at St. Peter's for the sad occasion of the congregation's closing. As I sat in that familiar sanctuary for the last time, I saw a few familiar faces but also the faces of many people who were not among the worshippers of my childhood years. We gave thanks for the years of St. Peter's ministry and gathered in the Fellowship Hall for a delightful reception; but when I left North Plainfield that day, I knew that I would never return, because it was no longer my hometown.

One of the most difficult of life experiences is when we come to that moment when our home changes, when what was once safe and familiar changes or disappears. It may be when we move on to a new community for employment or retirement; when long-time neighbours move or pass away; and especially when those among whom we have lived are taken away from us by death. While they live on in our memories and in the way we live that was influenced by their example, we are forced to face the harsh reality that *“time, like an ever-rolling stream, bears all our years away; they fly forgotten, as a dream dies at the opening day.”* (ELW Hymn 632). We may be tempted to accept an invitation to a homecoming, but while it may be nice to return to the place where we were raised, we may have to accept the harsh reality that this town is no longer the place we call home.

On All Saints’ Sunday, we give thanks *“for all the saints who from their labours rest”* (ELW Hymn 422). These are not only the famous saints of church history, but those also who have churches and hospitals named after them; we give thanks for all who have been made saints through their baptism into Christ Jesus, who through water and the Word are made into *“a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people.”* (1 Peter 2:9). We give thanks for the saints we have known and loved the people who brought us to the waters of Holy Baptism, placed the Holy Scriptures into our hands, and taught us by word and deed what it means to be a Christian. On this day of remembrance and thanksgiving, we especially remember those saints who have lived and served among us who have died in this past year, including those who have died within the past few weeks. As we remember then in this place that served as their spiritual home throughout their lives, we mourn their absence from the places where they once sat as we gathered to worship and praise our Lord in this place where God dwells amid God’s holy people. We gather as the church which is *“the communion of saints”* to give thanks for those saints who have lived among us and who now rest from their labours in the presence of the Lord.

All Saints’ Sunday is also an occasion for us to remember that while our home in this life is temporary and transitory, that the places that were once familiar to us will inevitably change, that our hometown and our home church may one day no longer be our home – that the hope that is at the centre of our faith promises us that there is a home that is eternal, that never changes, a home where we are always welcome and where we always belong. From the moment we are claimed by God as children, we have God’s promise that we will always dwell in the presence of the Lord. God promises to abide with us, to make God’s home among us, and when our days in this life come to an end God’s loving presence will remain with us. We live in the sure and certain hope that *“we do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we*

live or whether we die, we are the Lord's." (Romans 14:7-8). While our earthly homes are as temporary as are our earthly lives, we have the promise that "*neither death, nor life, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*" (Romans 8:38-39). We live in the blessed assurance that the one who claimed us through the waters of Holy Baptism is the God who is "*our help in ages past, our hope for years to come; our shelter from the stormy blast, and our eternal home.*" (ELW Hymn 632).

One of the most powerful messages of hope for those among whom God has dwelled all the days of our lives comes from the book of Revelation, the last book of the Bible that is commonly misunderstood and misused. Revelation is written in a language known as "apocalyptic," a type of code that was used in times of oppression when messages needed to be sent to communities of oppressed people without being intercepted by their oppressor. While apocalyptic appears in other parts of the Bible (including the book of Daniel and Mark 13), it is found primarily in the Revelation to John of Patmos, "*the revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place*" (Revelation 1:1). Written to seven churches in the western part of Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey), it is a message of hope written in language that may sound strange to us but would have been clear to those who understood the meaning of this type of language:

- "The book of Revelation was composed and sent to seven churches in the Roman province of Asia at some point between A.D. 69 and 96 in order to encourage them with the assurance that, despite all the forces marshalled against them, victory was theirs if they remained loyal to Christ ... the material in the book of Revelation is so important that a blessing is promised to the one who reads it aloud, and to those who hear and who keep what is written in the prophecy." – Bruce Metzger, *Breaking the Code*.

Today's second lesson comes from the next-to-last chapter of Revelation, in which John of Patmos shares his vision of "*a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.*" (21:1). God's presence, until now hidden behind the vault of heaven, now abides with those who dwell in the "new Jerusalem." The throne of God will now be amid the city, and the healing, sustenance, and relief, only glimpsed earlier in the book, will now appear in its fullness:

- “For this reason, they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them by day, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.” – 7:15-17.

Picking up on a theme from the final chapters of Isaiah, John sees a new heaven and a new earth replacing the ones that have vanished (“*For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind ... For as the new heavens and the new earth, which I will make, shall remain before me, says the LORD, so shall your descendants and your name remain.*” – Isaiah 65:17, 66:22). The theme of newness that was proclaimed in the second section of Isaiah and hinted at in the promises to the seven churches and in the song that greet the Lamb is now fulfilled:

- “See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them.” – Isaiah 42:9.
- “I will write on you the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem that comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name.” – Revelation 3:12.
- “They shall sing a new song: ‘You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation ...’” – 5:9.

What is past, the “first,” the provisional rather than the fundamental, is no more; this includes the sea, which in heaven became a threatening place to be endured or conquered and the earthly sea that had been an object of judgment (“*The second angel blew his trumpet, and something like a great mountain, burning with fire, was thrown into the sea*” – 8:8); this threat has now been destroyed because “*the sea was no more.*”

John then describes his vision of “*the holy city, the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.*” (21:2). That which descends from heaven is a blessing rather than a curse on humanity, for it is from God. Jerusalem is likened to a bride, an image from earlier in the book when the bride’s voice had been silenced in “Babylon,” the code word for the Roman Empire in Revelation (“*... and the light of a lamp will shine on you no more, and the voice of bridegroom and bride will be heard in you no more*” – 18:23). Now the true

bridegroom will appear and will be summoned to come to the bride (*“The Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come.’ And let everyone who hears say, ‘Come.’ And let everyone who is thirsty come.”* (22:17). From within this new Jerusalem comes *“a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘See, the home of God is among mortals.’”* (21:3). This “home of God” is God’s dwelling (*skene*, “tabernacle”); God’s dwelling with people characterizes the life of the holy nation in the Old Testament and the New Jerusalem in the vision of Ezekiel:

- “And I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you shall be my people.” – Leviticus 26:12.
- “You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I, the LORD, am your God and there is no other.” – Joel 2:27.
- “My dwelling place shall be with them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.” – Ezekiel 37:27.

In the New Testament, God’s dwelling/tabernacle is in the life of God’s holy, separate people: *“For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, ‘I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.’”* (2 Corinthians 6:16).

The presence of God amid God’s people will not be cold or distant; as was promised in Isaiah 25:8 and Rev. 7:17, God *“will wipe every tear from their eyes.”* All the things that caused crying and pain, all that sought to separate us from God and from those we live, will have no place in God’s holy city: *“Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away”* (21:4). As God promised through the prophet Isaiah, God declares that *“I am making all things new.”*

- “Do not remember the former things or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert ... to give drink to my chosen people, the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise.” – Isaiah 43:18-21.

John of Patmos is not only the witness to this vision; he is called by the voice of God to *“write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.”* (21:5), words that are to be shared with both the generation who will first receive his witness and all generations who yearn to hear this word of hope in whatever times of suffering and distress they

may be experiencing. John receives the assurance that *“it is done!”* from the one who is *“the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.”* (21:6).

- “What a day that will be, when God will wipe away all the tears and disgrace of all peoples. And, while we are feasting on the best foods and wine, God is swallowing up death forever. A place prepared. A feast for all peoples. Wisdom enough to go around. All the old has passed; behold, the new has come!” – Thomas R. Steagald.

This is a time of remembrance for our church and nation. As we remember the lives of the faithful departed, God’s blessed saints who from their labours rest, we also remember those who gave their lives for the sake of our nation and for the cause of freedom. This year marks the 100th anniversary of the Remembrance Day Poppy, that symbol of the sign of life John MacRae discovered amid the destruction in Flanders’ Field, where the *“the poppies blow between the crosses, row on row.”* The poppy is a resilient plant that can grow in the harshest of environments, including battle-scarred fields where soldiers died who *“short days ago ... lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow, loved and were loved, and now we lie in Flanders fields.”* Remembering can be difficult; it reminds us that the home we shared with these faithful departed no longer exists, that while the places we shared may remain they are not the same because those with whom we shared them are gone from our sight.

- “Coffee cups on the counter, jackets on the chair, papers on the doorstep – but you’re not there. Everything is everything ... but you’re missing.” – Bruce Springsteen.

Home is no longer the same without the people we love; but as we remember and give thanks for all the saints who have loved us and blessed us, we look forward to that day when God will make God’s home among us, when God will wipe away all the tears we shed on this day, when God will gather us into our eternal home where death, mourning, crying, pain, grief, and suffering will be no more. We look forward to that day when our Lord will gather us together, *“so that where I am, there you may be also ... [For] I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life; no one comes to the Father except through me.”* (John 14:3, 6). We look forward to the homecoming that awaits us when we are led to our eternal home by our Good Shepherd, who leads us in paths of righteousness all the days of our lives and gives us the blessed assurance that *“surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.”* (Psalm 23:6).

Amen.