11-1-26 sermon
All Saints' Day
Matthew 5.1-12, Revelation 7.9-17

When you hear the word "God," what image springs to mind for you? What picture just formed in your mind? What words sprang to mind? Almighty? Father? Trinity? In this part of the revelation of Jesus to John, we find ourselves in the throne room of God. Looking on, as angels prostrate themselves before the throne, singing, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen." Surrounded by a great multitude of people, that no one could count, with the elders and the four mysterious living creatures. Almighty God. On the throne. Receiving the worship God is due. It's a powerful image. A vivid image. And one that may have come to mind for some of us just now. A powerful image, of a powerful God. An image beloved of those who advocate for a more "muscular Christianity." People who take all those images of Jesus hanging limply on the cross, and instead give him massive biceps, and six-pack abs, as he tears the cross apart. A Christianity that emphasizes the *warrior* imagery that can be found in scripture. A Christianity full of flags, stirring, martial music, and a willingness to engage with politicians who promise to privilege *their* version of the faith. Politicians who will "make America Christian again." It's the kind of Christianity that seeks political power to, say, put the Ten Commandments in courthouses, and on classroom walls, even if it means supporting politicians who break many of the commandments on a regular, and very public basis. "Thou shalt not bear false witness" comes to mind. I truly understand the attraction of pursuing political power for your own ends, even if it means having to hold your nose in the presence of the one who can provide that power. But to do so is to fundamentally misunderstand power, not least the power of God. And this particular revelation of Jesus to John ought to be a cautionary tale for those who seek political power as a means to an end, and not a call to arms, as it were.

The text begins with these words: "After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying, "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne and to the Lamb!" The word "salvation" only appears three times in the Revelation, in a kind of narrative progression. This is the first instance, where this great multitude declares that salvation belongs to our God. The second is in chapter 12, where we read, "Then I heard a loud voice in heaven proclaiming, 'Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Messiah, for the accuser of our brothers and sisters has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God." This is a declaration that the one who tormented the church has been judged by God and overthrown.

The third and final time we find the word "salvation" in the Revelation is in chapter 19, where we read, "After this I heard what seemed to be the loud voice of a great multitude in heaven, saying, 'Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power to our God, his judgments are true and

just; he has judged the great prostitute who corrupted the earth with her prostitution, and he has avenged on her the blood of his servants." And now the picture being painted throughout the revelation comes clearly into view, for those with "eyes to see, and ears to hear." God's judgment is against *Rome*, and those who align themselves with its power. Those who have persecuted the church for refusing to bow before the throne of the emperor.

When we hear the word, "salvation," we often think of it in spiritual terms. We have been saved from our sins, by grace, which is true. But the language of "salvation" in the first century Roman empire is not spiritual: it is political. For – beginning with Emperor Augustus – one of the titles adopted by the Caesars is, "Savior of Rome." When Rome conquered a people, the Gospel of Salvation would be pronounced: "Hear the good news, conquered people: you have been saved by Rome, Caesar brings peace and security to you. Rejoice!" So when John declares that "salvation belongs to our God," he is not only making a positive statement about the God of the church. He is making a pejorative statement about Rome. For Rome cannot live up to its own hype: it does *not* hold the power of salvation it claims. It promises much – but fails the majority of its people. Caesar and the ruling elite enjoy all the empire has to offer, while the vast majority of those who inhabit the empire are poor, or enslaved. The cult of the emperor – the savior – is everywhere. Temples and statues a visual reminder to whom worship and allegiance is to be given. You've probably seen busts of emperors head and shoulders, but rarely a full statue. That was because it was easier simply to replace the head of Caesar on all those statues, than to produce new ones every time. Caesar is literally the head of Rome: Christ is the head of the church. A competition is being waged throughout the empire. A competition for allegiance and affection, and woe betide anyone who dares to refuse to give it to the emperor. Woe betide anyone who dares to believe that they have a different savior – especially if they proclaim the Good News that Jesus is Lord – and not Caesar. Woe betide anyone who dares to live as if they were citizens of a different empire than Rome. Those who would dare to believe – and teach – something like this:

> Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of *heaven*.
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> Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
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> Blessed are the meek, for *they* will inherit the earth.
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> Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.
>
> Blessed are the *merciful*, for they will receive mercy.
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> Blessed are the *pure* in heart, for they will see God.
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> Blessed are the *peacemakers*, for they will be called children of God.
>
> Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."
>
> "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

And now John gives us this vision of those who will experience the truth of Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount. This great multitude of people who refused to bow before the throne of Caesar, to give their allegiance and affection to that satanic empire. Those who refused to accommodate themselves to the political power Rome offered in hopes of securing social, economic and religious security for themselves. These are those who sought salvation and security from their God and from the Lamb, who was slain – by Rome. These are those who bore witness *against* the empire, and who are now receiving that promised reward in heaven. These are the martyrs – the witnesses – who refused to seek an easier life by accommodating themselves to empire. These are the saints of God, who we honor on this All Saints' Day, even as we pray that we may find ourselves among that number when John's vision becomes reality.

But this is not a romantic vision. It is a very honest vision, because it names the suffering that often accompanies resisting Caesar's power. "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account." That is as true in the *twenty* first century as it was in the *first* century. And sometimes the ones who revile and utter all kinds of evil against you – falsely – do so in the name of Jesus. Because when you align yourself closely with Caesar, when you seek power to promote *your* faith, even with the best intentions, you may find yourself *opposed* to God, even persecuting your siblings in Christ.

Most of the Feast Days of individual saints honor men and women who literally gave their lives in service of the kin-dom of God. Those who bore witness to the One in whom salvation truly lies. Who denounced those with the power to do good, but who instead did evil, like the prophets of old, as Jesus said. But in the eighth century, Pope Gregory III dedicated a chapel in St Peter's in Rome to *all* the saints, and today is the date that chapel was dedicated. So we observe All Saints Day on November 1st, remembering *all* those who have gone before us. Those who form part of that great multitude, our "great cloud of witnesses."

All those who showed us by their life and words what it means to follow Christ. Most of whom were "ordinary saints" – regular folk – like those we will name aloud in just a little while. One of whom poured out their life in service of the young, wanting them to know they were loved, that they were special. That they belonged. Another who was the consummate teacher, of children and adults. Someone who embodies one of my favorite sayings: "Those who can, do. Those who believe *others* can, teach." Another of whom said, "Husbands shouldn't commit domestic violence without consequence. Society should protect victims of domestic violence. Women should be able to participate fully in all areas of our shared life." Those saints who dared to believe in and work for the dignity of all people, the peacemakers, the merciful, those who didn't hunger for *power*, but instead hungered and thirsted for righteousness.

“For this reason,” John tells us, “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, nor any scorching heat, for the Lamb at the center 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." Words which John will repeat at the end of the Revelation: “He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

I began this morning by asking what image comes to mind when you hear the word “God.” In the vision, we see God seated on the throne. Almighty. Powerful. Angels prostrate before the throne. The image of power we often think of. One which N T Wright says can be described as “a faceless heavenly bureaucrat, or a violent, celestial bully.” Because we often project our own understandings of power onto God. But that image is tempered by the end of the vision. Yes, God is seated on the throne.

But God doesn’t stay there.

Because when God is confronted by those who have suffered under the weight and injustice of empire, Almighty God does this. He descends from the throne, to hold our face in his hands, and gently wipes away every tear to be found there – whatever that cause.

May that image remain with us.

Not just the image of God on the throne. But the God who condescends to us, the God who comes down to us, to wipe away our tears.

May that image not only shape how we see God, but how we see ourselves, and how we see each other.

Amen, and amen.