

Always With the Lord

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
November 7, 2021—All Saints Sunday

- [John 14:1-3 NRSV](#) ¹ “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. ²In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? ³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.
- [1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 CEB](#) ¹³ Brothers and sisters, we want you to know about people who have died so that you won’t mourn like others who don’t have any hope. ¹⁴ Since we believe that Jesus died and rose, so we also believe that God will bring with him those who have died in Jesus. ¹⁵ What we are saying is a message from the Lord: we who are alive and still around at the Lord’s coming definitely won’t go ahead of those who have died. ¹⁶ This is because the Lord himself will come down from heaven with the signal of a shout by the head angel and a blast on God’s trumpet. First, those who are dead in Christ will rise. ¹⁷ Then, we who are living and still around will be taken up together with them in the clouds to meet with the Lord in the air. That way we will always be with the Lord. ¹⁸ So encourage each other with these words.

Canadian folk singer Joni Mitchell was reading a book during a flight. Pausing for a moment, she set down the book to look out the window. Obviously she had seen clouds before. As she later wrote, clouds “block the sun, they rain and snow on everyone.” But as if for the first time she saw the clouds below in a new light. In poetic lyrics she described the clouds as “angel hair” and “ice cream castles” and “feather canyons.” She had seen clouds “from both sides now.”¹

The Christian Church’s observance called “All Saints Day” invites us to see the experience of death “from both sides” – from the perspective of grief for what we’ve lost when someone we love dies, and from the perspective of hope because of the assurance of our Christian faith.

To appreciate how sadness can be answered by hope, let’s consider the passage we just heard from apostle Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians.

He was addressing a specific worry of some Christians in those early days – a matter that doesn’t really bother most believers today. Back then, after they accepted the good news of Jesus Christ, many believed that the Risen Christ was going to return soon – in their lifetimes! – and they needed to be ready. But a year passed, then several years, then maybe a decade... and they hadn’t witnessed any dramatic return of the Resurrected Christ.

In the meantime, some in their Christian community had died... died before Christ’s return. Oh no! What would become of them? Did expiring trigger an expiration date on being claimed as one of God’s beloved? The Thessalonian Christians feared for their dearly departed.

¹ <https://genius.com/Joni-mitchell-both-sides-now-lyrics#:~:text=Both%20Sides%20Now%20Lyrics.%20%5BIntro%5D%20%5BVerse%201%5D%20Rows,that%20way.%20%5BVerse%202%5D%20But%20now%20they%20only>, accessed 11/2/2021

This was the situation St. Paul addressed in the passage we heard from the fourth chapter of First Thessalonians.

He told them, "Don't despair."

He told them, "Don't be like others who wallow in uncontrollable grief because they have no hope beyond this life."

He told them, "The living and the dead remain under God's watchful protection and comforting care. Those who have died may be apart from us but they remain a part of us."

Anticipating their question of "How is that possible?" Paul described a fantastic unspecified future occasion that assured that the living and the dead are not parted forever. In Paul's scenario, at a time only God knows, a signal would issue forth – an angel's shout, a heavenly trumpet's blast. At that signal the Lord would gather to himself both those who are dead and those who are still around. Paul wrote that they would be "taken up together... in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air."

Take notice of that seemingly insignificant detail in Paul's description. The living and the dead will be taken up "in the clouds." In the Bible, clouds are often used as a symbol for God.

- In the Old Testament story of the Israelites being led out of Egyptian slavery into the Sinai wilderness, Exodus states that "During the day the Lord went in front of them in a pillar of cloud to show them the way...."²
- The Hebrew prophet Nahum described God by writing, "Where the Lord walks, storms arise; the clouds are the dust raised by [God's] feet!"³
- Psalm 104 describes God as using "the clouds as [a] chariot and rid[ing] on the wings of the wind."⁴
- In the New Testament's story of The Transfiguration when disciples Peter, James and John witnessed Moses and Elijah appearing with Jesus, a cloud descended upon the disciples. The cloud said to them, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am pleased – listen to him!"⁵
- And the Book of Acts opens with the Risen Christ being taken up to heaven as the disciples watched, until "a cloud hid him from their sight."⁶

Yes, in the Bible, clouds are often a symbol for the presence of God. So when both the dead and the living are taken up to meet the Lord "in the clouds," that's saying that "in life and in death we belong to God."

...Which is the assurance we solemnly commemorate on All Saints Day – that, as Paul wrote in Romans Chapter 14, "...whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord."⁷

We grieve loved ones we have lost... those who died because of the pandemic, or accident or violence or disease or old age.

But we do not mourn unconsolably "like others who don't have any hope."

² Exodus 13:21a Today's English Version

³ Nahum 1:3b Today's English Version

⁴ Psalm 104:3b-c Today's English Version

⁵ Matthew 17:5-6 Today's English Version

⁶ Acts 1:9 Today's English Version

⁷ Romans 14:8

The New Testament Letter to the Hebrews contains a verse that frequently comes to mind on All Saints Day. It offers the encouragement, "So then, with endurance, let's also run the race that is laid out in front of us, since we have such a great cloud of witnesses surrounding us."⁸

"...A great cloud of witnesses...."

Parents and grandparents, siblings and children, co-workers and customers and classmates, friends and neighbors and church pew partners, believers in this time and in every time and every place are part of that "cloud of witnesses," secure in God's everlasting care, encouraging us in our personal journeys of life and of faith.

Author Mitch Finley offers these poetic reflections on our lives among "a great cloud of witnesses":

The Christian doctrine
of the communion of saints
is simple, really.
All it says is
that once you buy the farm
you still live on the farm.
All it says is
that those who have gone before us
are still with us.
All it says is
that past generations still count
and must be taken into account.
In other words,
we're all in this together.
All of us.⁹

As we remember and honor and give thanks for "all the saints who from their labors rest," let's embrace instructions Paul gave as he closed his message to the Thessalonians. He wrote, "We will always be with the Lord. So encourage each other with these words."¹⁰

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⁸ Hebrews 12:1a Common English Bible

⁹ Mitch Finley, in his "Whispers of Love" as cited in *Spiritual Literacy: Reading the Sacred in Everyday Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 478 at <https://www.homileticonline.com/members/search?keywords=All+Saints&bookId=&topicId=&searchType=6&page=3&ripp=20> accessed 11/1/2021

¹⁰ 1 Thessalonians 4:17b-18 Common English Bible