

For All the **Saints**

Near the end of the long season of Ordinary Time, there comes a remarkable day: November 1, All Saints' Day. Some churches mark the day on the Sunday following; others take the opportunity to worship midweek. In any case, it is a day not to be missed. On this day, we not only remember those who have gone on before us, but we anticipate the life promised to us all in Jesus Christ. It is a day when we remember that the line that separates life and death is not as stark as we sometimes assume.

In her book *The Cloister Walk*, Kathleen Norris tells of a visit to the Benedictine monastery where she sometimes goes for spiritual retreats. She was taking part in a special program for laypeople when the monk who was their leader said to her, "It's time for you to meet the rest of the community." She was surprised when he took her not to a dormitory, the kitchen, or the chapel, but to the cemetery.

As they walked by the graves, the old monk told her stories about each of the deceased. He had lived at the monastery for more than sixty years, and he knew everyone who had been buried there. He also knew that one day he would be there himself, in their company.

Walking through the cemetery with that Benedictine monk, Norris realized in a way that she hadn't before that the separation between the living and the dead is not so great after all.

It is true that the separation between life and death does feel stark and severe. Yet on All Saints' Day, perhaps more than any other day, we dare to believe that this barrier is not as impenetrable as we think.

There is a Lutheran church on the plains of Nebraska, built three generations ago by Swedish immigrants looking for a new life. The communion rail is built in an exact half circle—it represents the visible part of the communion of saints. The other half that cannot be seen is just as real—an invisible and almost tangible reminder of all those who complete the circle even though they now live on the other side of death.

Even now, we are part of that great circle, the communion of saints. When God brings creation to completion, not even this thin membrane called death will divide us, for we've seen a vision of the river of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God, and all God's servants there, together, worshipping in joy and light (Rev. 22:1–5).

The conviction of that hope came powerfully to Robert Lowry, a Baptist minister living in Brooklyn, New York, in 1864. An epidemic was raging through the city then, and Lowry mourned the passing of so many of his friends and acquaintances. He found himself wondering, repeatedly,

whether they would ever meet again. Having parted at the river of death, would they meet at the river of life? The images of Revelation fresh in his mind, Lowry sat down at the organ to give himself consolation and to release so many pent-up emotions. The words and music of a hymn flowed out:

Shall we gather at the river, where bright angel feet
have trod, with its crystal tide forever flowing by the
throne of God?

Yes, we'll gather at the river, the beautiful, the beautiful
river; gather with the saints at the river that flows by
the throne of God.

Most hymnals have just four verses of the hymn, but another is often excluded:

At the smiling of the river, mirror of the Saviour's face
Saints, whom death will never sever, lift their songs of
saving grace.

Not even death can sever the ties that bind us to one another and to all our ancestors in the faith. Nor can anything separate us from the love of God—the God who grants us visions, sparks our imaginations, and kindles our hope—the God who keeps every good promise.

So we sing. The vision of a new heaven and a new earth, the promise of the river of life sustain us and give us hope, for this life and the next. In fact, we can hardly keep from singing in the face of such promise.

On All Saints' Day, and every Lord's Day, we sing our praise as well as our confidence in the One who saves us. Indeed, whenever Christians gather we are wont to sing, for in singing we express our faith in a way that goes beyond our words. Indeed, we embody our very unity in the body of Christ—the communion of saints—when we raise our voices as one.

Singing, then, is a crucial part of Christian worship. Discover all sorts of hymns and songs—ones you already know and ones that are new to you—in the lectionary aids issue of *Call to Worship: Liturgy, Music, Preaching & the Arts*, available from the Office of Theology and Worship.

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Adapted from original article by Kimberly Bracken Long. For information about other special days and emphases, visit pcusa.org/worship. Go to pcusa.org/calltoworship for more information about *Call to Worship*. Contact PDS, (800) 524-2612, to subscribe.