

The Perfect Saints at the Perfect Time

(John 11:32-44)

Sermon delivered by The Rev. Matt Rhodes at Christ Church, Millwood, Virginia
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May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

*Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.*¹

The words spoken by Mary seemed to hang in the air forever, and as they began to sink in he could hear the agony in her voice. They are words dripping with grief and pain ... and disappointment. Jesus, the close friend of her brother Lazarus, was not there at the end. Despite his love for his friend and for the miraculous healings performed by the teacher, he was not there at her brother's bedside when he died.

In the eyes of Mary, this man who loved her family and who was loved deeply by her and her brother and their sister Martha **had failed them**. Those gathered around were incredulous: this miracle worker, the man who restored sight to the blind, could not save the life of his friend. And as Jesus looked into Mary's eyes and the words she spoke – and the muttering he undoubtedly heard from those standing nearby – sank in, we read that he was deeply moved.

And he began to weep.

In this moment, Jesus was swept up in the emotion of the moment and the pain of Lazarus' family. That, together with the loss he was feeling over the death of his friend, led him to break down. The triumphant Jesus ... the Jesus who would break out of the tomb and rise in glory ... the Jesus who called religious and political leaders to task and raised his voice loudly for all those on the margins ... **cried**.

But this moment was not the end of the story for Mary and Martha ... and it was definitely not the end of the story for Lazarus. As we see time again throughout the ministry of Jesus, all things happen for a reason ... and they always happen in time. **God's time**. Jesus had not gotten there when Mary and Martha wanted, but he arrived **exactly** when he was **needed**.

When he arrived, he changed lives ... and he changed the world. Jesus asked Martha if she remembered his promise that if she believed, she would see the glory of God. And the glory of God was on full display that day: Lazarus, the beloved brother and friend who had died, walked out of his tomb. He received the miraculous gift of a new chapter in his journey on earth, and his story continued.

¹ John 11:32 (NRSV).

Today as we celebrate the Feast of All Saints, we will remember the names of all those who have died during the past year and reflect on the chapters they wrote in their own stories. They are the names of people who arrived in our lives in God's time – husbands, wives, parents, children, friends and relatives. They are the names of those who by their presence, their love and their connection to us changed this church. And they are names of people who because of their impact on our lives changed both the wider world and the individual worlds in which we live.

When each one of these brothers and sisters in the family of God died, we did exactly as Jesus did: we were troubled; we were moved; we wept. And as we remember them again today, yes, we may feel those emotions once again. But just as Jesus asked Martha, he asks each one of us: *Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?*² Those whom we remember have moved one step closer to that reward; they now rest, awaiting the day when they will at last see the fullness of God's glory. As Paul wrote in his first letter to the church in Corinth, they will "see face to face" the God who created them and loved them, and they "will know fully" even as they – and yes, as each one of us – have "been fully known."³

In his book *Wishful Thinking*, Frederick Buechner says, "In his holy flirtation with the world, God occasionally drops a pocket handkerchief. These handkerchiefs are called saints."⁴ But, he continues, our perception of saints as perfect people living perfect lives is incorrect. "The feet of saints are as much of clay as everybody else's, and their sainthood consists less of what they have done than of what God has for some reason chosen to do through them."⁵

What God has for some reason chosen to do through them – what a beautiful thought! Those whom we remember are saints because of how God acted through them in their lives. As they raised their families and spent time with their friends; as they worked and as they enjoyed times of leisure; in their waking and in their sleeping; as they built this church and strengthened this community; as they prayed and as they waited: in all of these moments, God was acting through them.

Creation did not end with the first few chapters of Genesis; creation is an ongoing process. The saints we remember today were created to enrich our lives and the life of this world. And even in their imperfection, they were created as the perfect individuals through whom God acted.

They truly were saints who acted exactly how they were needed at exactly the right time: not according to our timetable, but – as with the raising of Lazarus, in God's time. In the words of the hymn we just sang, "they were all of them saints of God."⁶ And, God helping, may we all be saints too. Amen.

² John 11:40 (NRSV).

³ 1 Corinthians 13:12 (NRSV).

⁴ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*, quoted at <http://www.frederickbuechner.com/blog/2016/11/1/all-saints-day>.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ "I Sing a Song of the Saints of God" (293), *Hymnal 1982*.