

All Saints' Day
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St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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Preached via Zoom during COVID-19

I watched 18 Sandhill cranes fly over me the other day. I don't know what cranes do, and I don't know what they eat. I don't know where they live, and, really, I'm not even sure what exactly they are good for. But I do know that I had been having a down few days and they seemed to snap me out of it.

Sometimes the stresses and pressures of 2020 weigh me down. Not always, thankfully. Maybe they weigh you down, too. The political unrest coupled with the worries about the health and wellbeing of our community sometimes hang a certain heaviness on my thoughts and feelings. And last week, I had a few days where I wasn't feeling all that cheerful. And then I saw 18 cranes, and though I cannot quite explain it, I felt better.

Happy All Saints — the day of the year when we remember those who have died in the love of Christ. We remember those big saints who have gone before — Joan of Arc, Simon the Martyr, St. Paul and St. Cecelia. And we also remember those even bigger saints near to us who have died — beloved parents, children, friends, lovers, spouses, and co-parishioners. It's a beautiful day when we remember that death is not the end of the story. In the words of Jesus, preaching on the mountain, "Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven."

And as much as I find comfort in the idea of my loved ones resting in the bosom of the almighty, and as much as I am consoled by God's care for the dead — especially in the grip of a global pandemic — I find that sure and certain knowledge of the resurrection can be a little lofty for my day to day needs. What is it that Jesus is saying to me, when I'm bouncing around my house for the seventh consecutive month? What is Jesus saying to us when we notice cases of COVID increasing, teachers and healthcare workers standing regularly in danger, depression and isolation creeping into our city?

Strangely, Jesus says that we are blessed. I know for a fact that there are poor and struggling people in our communities. And yet Jesus comes again and again to tell us that we are blessed? How, precisely does that work?

I think the cranes gave me a little bit of insight. As I was standing there, in the windy sunshine, watching them fly overhead, I felt myself stop struggling. And by this, I mean, I found myself letting go of the November 1st, 2020 that I had intended to have in my mind — the one where we are all together, singing hymns, huffing incense, and listening to breath-taking live music in our beloved sanctuary. Most great faiths in the world preach some kind of acceptance. And I found myself, while the cranes called to one another, finding a place of radical acceptance for the world in which we live, right now, as it is. I found myself accepting Zoom calls and stress, strange limitations governed by COVID, and a reduced ability to gather at the parish.

And in that moment, I think I started to understand at least a little what Jesus was trying to say to us — and why it is so radical. When you are stuck in your house, scared and maybe a little lonesome? Even in that moment, God is with you and calls you blessed. When you are confused by the political tumult and are not sure about the nation's future? Even then you are blessed. And when you mourn our beloved dead — those people who have meant so very much to us as a church over the decades — God even says to us that in those moments, we are blessed. I appreciate this is all hard to wrap our minds around. I certainly haven't felt particularly blessed for most of 2020.

But then I saw the birds and was reminded that God has promised to walk by me, to walk by us, and indeed is right where whenever two or three gather. And that God blesses the November 1 we are having rather than then November 1 that we had in our minds. I think my 18 cranes were an invitation to remember the ways in which I am blessed instead of focusing on the ways in which it seems 2020 has taken blessings away.

You are the saints of God. We have been brought through this time and will continue to be brought through this time. The text today is reminding us that we are blessed, and I think we have an opportunity to claim that blessing or not. There

isn't any situation that cannot be redeemed by God. Indeed, the very grave has been overcome by the power of love in our midst.

Blessed are you when you are stuck in your room, waiting for a vaccine.

Blessed are you when you can't see your family this Thanksgiving.

Blessed are you when you are furloughed from work.

Blessed are you when your eyes hurt after a long day on the computer.

Blessed are you when you're missing your friends.

Blessed are you when your 2020 isn't looking nearly like what it was supposed to.

I'm not going to claim that I can feel my own sense of blessedness all the time. In fact, it might be somewhat rare. But for a few minutes this week, I could feel the promises of the beatitudes were real for me and for this parish. For that I am grateful. All it took was a little reminder from the birds which, I suppose, was God's sermon. Happy All Saints' Day, you wonderful, blessed people. Amen.