

*On this mountain the LORD Almighty will prepare
a feast of rich food for all peoples,
a banquet of aged wine—*

the best of meats and the finest of wines.

⁷ *On this mountain he will destroy
the shroud that enfolds all peoples,
the sheet that covers all nations;*

⁸ *he will swallow up death forever.
The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears
from all faces;
he will remove the disgrace of his people
from all the earth.*

The LORD has spoken.

⁹ *In that day they will say,*

*“Surely this is our God;
we trusted in him, and he saved us.*

*This is the LORD, we trusted in him;
let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation.” (Isaiah 25:6-9)*

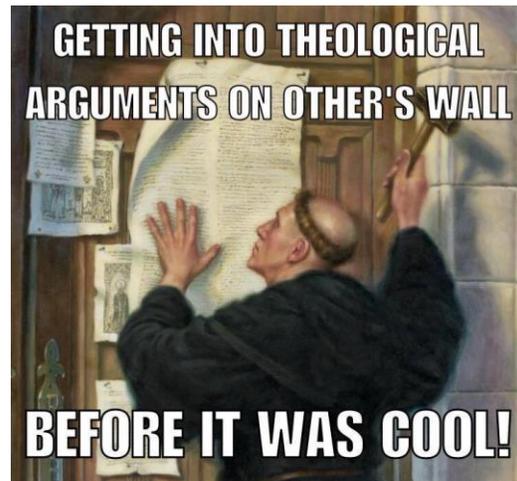
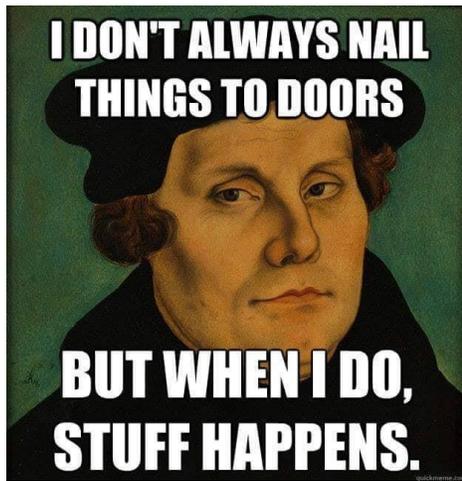
What does All Saints' Day Mean?

Did you enjoy the holidays this past week? Last Sunday, we celebrated Reformation Day here and over at HVL. Reformation Day actually falls on October 31st. Here are a few of the Facebook posts that I saw that day:



The cornerstone from our seminary with the three solas: Grace alone, Scripture alone, faith alone.





These two are more Facebook, right?

But, of course, that wasn't the only holiday this week. October 31st also was Halloween. If you're of Mexican descent, yesterday, November 2nd, was *el dia de Muertos* or the Day of the Dead. On the Catholic Calendar, it's actually All Souls' Day, but in Mexican culture, it's a combination of pre-Christian traditions and Catholic theology. It has generated a distinctive style of art. Here are a few examples I've seen:



Squeezed in between Halloween and the Day of the Dead, there's a holiday that we almost don't notice in the Lutheran church, although historically it was quite important. It falls on November 1st and it's actually the reason why Halloween exists and it's also the reason that Luther chose October 31st to post the 95 Theses: he knew lots of people would be coming to Wittenberg for this festival. Do you know what it was? All Saints' Day. Have you ever heard of it? If you have, do you know what the point is? That's what we want to consider this morning. **What does All Saints' Day mean?**

I.

All our readings for today point to the answer. That's even true of our Old Testament lesson, although it might make you wonder how. The word "saint" doesn't even appear in these four verses. So what do they have to do with All Saints' Day? These verses are about death. Death is what every holiday this week was about – even Reformation Day. Luther was keenly aware that life on this earth is short and then we have to face our Lord. He spent decades in terror of that meeting. Reformation Day was about finding peace and joy at the thought of that meeting. All Saints' Day, too, is about the reality of death. Not in the sense that if we live good enough lives here, we'll be declared to be saints after we die and our good works will be available for the church to apply to other sinners as they struggle through life. That's the Catholic idea of a saint, but it's not ours and it's not found anywhere in the Bible. Rather, a saint is, quite simply, someone whose sins Jesus has taken away – in other words, a Christian. All Saints' Day is about the reality that Jesus has conquered death for us.

That, you do see in the lesson from Isaiah this morning. Isaiah wrote, **"On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations; he will swallow up death**

forever.” Isaiah pictures death as a shroud covering all nations. A shroud is cloth that you wrap around a body. We don't really use shrouds much in our burial practices today, but if you think of what you see on TV or in movies, you won't be far off. On TV, if someone is dead, what do they always do? Cover the body, usually with a sheet. That sheet is a kind of shroud. Isaiah says that a shroud covers all nations and enfolds all peoples. Every human being who has ever lived is wrapped in that sheet – because we're all going to die.

Why do we die? Because we sin. We're born with corrupt hearts that don't want to listen to God. We think we know what's best and we think that God shouldn't tell us any different. That sinful pride leads us to say all kinds of arrogant and hurtful things and to do all kinds of selfish and egotistical actions. For all that sin, we deserve to die. Even more than that, once we're wrapped in that shroud, we deserve to spend eternity in hell. And if we dare to think God can't be talking about us, we need to remember that Isaiah says that shroud enfolds all peoples and covers all nations. Every human being who has ever been born is a sinner.

Except for one: Jesus. He alone of all the billions of people who have walked this earth was sinless. He alone had a heart that was perfectly in tune with God and so he alone lived a life of perfect love and obedience to God and perfect love and service to his fellow man. Because Jesus was also the Son of God, when he did that, it counted for all of us. Then Jesus wrapped himself in that sheet of death for us. He went to the cross and died in our place. And not just in our place, Isaiah says that he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples and covers all nations. He died for everybody. When Jesus rose, he began to take that shroud away. He began to swallow up death forever.

All Saints' Day is about victory over death for every one of us. Isaiah said that God would give us that victory **“on this mountain.”** What did he mean? Well, in one sense, he did mean the mountain where Jerusalem stands, Mt. Zion. That's where Jesus died and was buried. That's where Jesus rose. But Isaiah often uses Mt. Zion to represent believers. So, in one sense, Jesus destroyed death during those three days from Friday to Sunday when he died and rose, on that mountain, in that physical place in Israel. But in another sense, Jesus continues to swallow up death on Mt. Zion – he does it here among his people. The mountain is finally the church. This congregation is a peak on that mountain. Here, we are gathered in our spiritual home around our loving Savior so that he can rip that shroud off of us personally. That's the message of All Saints' Day. We are all dying. Many people that we know and love have died. But it's only temporary. It only lasts until Jesus returns. Until he does, those who die trusting in their Savior live with him in heaven. So **what does All Saints Day mean? Death is only a stop on the way to eternal life.**

II.

When I was studying for the ministry, my grandparents on my mother's side were very excited about that. My grandpa had nicknames for all of his grandkids. When I was little, he used to call me “Doc” because my mom wanted me to become a doctor. When I began to study for the ministry, he changed that nickname to “Rev.” As a student, I got to preach in their congregation a few times and commune them. They bought me my first robe – the one the congregation replaced at my 25th anniversary in the ministry. I was ordained in their church. But it was different with my grandparents on my father's side. They were hardcore Polish Catholics. On their 50th wedding anniversary, Pope John Paul II sent them a blessing, in Polish, signed by him personally, and it became a shrine in their house. I never had the opportunity to preach in their church or to commune them. But All Saints' Day reminds us that all those who trust in Jesus go home to be with him when they die. That's true because of how we come to be saints. It's not something we do or earn. It's something Jesus won for us on the cross and gave to us through the gospel and preserves for us all our lives long.

Through that gospel, Jesus makes us one in Christ. All true believers are united into one spiritual family, the Church. But sin divides that family. It does that in many ways. One way is through death. That's Isaiah's focus here. Of course, we miss our loved ones who have died. People sometimes try desperately to maintain contact with those departed loved ones. In the ancient near east, if a child died, they often buried him or her under the floor of the house to keep them near. In Mexican culture, on the Day of the Dead, many families go to the cemetery and bring their loved ones their favorite foods and drinks, and offer them to them on their graves. But that idea isn't just something that comes from cultures that we Americans rather rudely think of as “primitive.” Many Americans believe that their loved ones are watching them from heaven. The Bible does not say that. If you think about it, and it would be hard to imagine heaven being pure joy if we had to watch the people we love here hurt and sin and struggle. A few weeks ago, I was talking to a grief counselor, and she spoke of trying to maintain a relationship with your loved one. Her own son had died and she told me

about putting out a stocking for him at Christmas and setting his place at holiday meals. God gives us people we love. When death takes them, it hurts deeply.

But those ties don't end with death, at least not for those who believe. All those who died trusting in Jesus are still part of his Holy Christian Church – the same Church that you and I belong to. We are all still one in Christ. When we sing Jesus' praises here, we are joining them in what they're doing in heaven right now. When we get to heaven, we will all gather around the throne of God together. Now, what that means in terms of our relationship with each other, I can't really say. The Bible doesn't tell us much. But those pictures of us gathered around Jesus imply that we will share our love and our fellowship there.

There's another way that sin divides the Church. When churches teach false doctrine, we are forced to separate from them here. God commands us to do that. His reason is simple: false teaching hurts our faith. It can kill it. Jesus told us to hold to his entire teaching, not just to the most important parts. So if a church does not teach what God's word teaches, we have to separate from them, and that hurts. I know that from my own family. But All Saints' Day reminds us that God's grace still applies to all who believe in Jesus. None of us is perfect in our faith here, not even us Lutherans. But Jesus makes us holy in God's sight and he promises all believers eternal life. While all false teaching is bad for our faith, the God of all grace often preserves believers in their faith in spite of the errors that exist in their churches.

So I have every reason to hope that all my grandparents understood the gospel and trusted in their Savior and are with him today. If so, they are all one with Christ and with each other now. I hope to see them again in heaven, where we will all be gathered around Jesus' throne. That is a really important truth for us. When we stand in heaven, all of us will be perfectly united in mind and thought. All false teaching will be gone forever. So the hard things we have to do now, are temporary. And it is always true that everyone who trusts in Jesus is a saint. We are all holy in God's eyes. We are all brothers and sisters in Christ, even when we cannot formally recognize that here.

We will experience that unity as soon as we get to heaven. But it will reach its greatest fulfillment when Jesus returns. That's when he will swallow up death forever. When Jesus comes back all the saints of God will rise and live. We will all have our sin stripped away and our hearts will line up perfectly with God's. And we will rejoice. Isaiah says that God will wipe every tear from our eyes. He says that God will take away all disgrace and humiliation here. All that sin does to us will be gone – again as soon as we see Jesus. But finally and completely and visibly for all the world to see, when Jesus returns. Death itself will die. And we will be home. **So what does All Saints Day mean? The whole family of God will have eternal life.**

Now obviously, I've tiptoed around the part of this that is most important to me right now. I did that on purpose, because I could never get through this sermon if I got too specific. But you all know what a message like this makes me think about. It's possible that I'll never be able to talk about that without tearing up. I might have to wait until I get to heaven to be fully at peace. You may have your own loss that is just as hard to talk about. But All Saints' Day promises us that we are going to get home. And all the hurts and all the losses of this life will be healed, right along with all our sin and all death. Jesus did that for us. And you know what? If he loved us so much that he died and rose to save us, he will take care of us even in our hurts and sorrows here, until he brings us home. Trust in his love. Amen.