



All Saints Sunday
2 November 2025

Ascension Lutheran Church
Rev. Christian W. Marien

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

I am not often surprised. Yes, of course, there are still moments that sideswipe my days and beg my attention when I am caught off guard in one way or another, but for the most part, I have been a pastor long enough to carry a fairly large library of experience – it is both the gift and challenge of walking with so many of you. So very often your life experience arrives in this sanctuary in one way or another – my wife is mad at me; my son needs a transplant; the doctor said it was cancer; my mom was diagnosed with Alzheimers; my daughter’s relationship is falling apart; my friend’s drinking is out of control. Please know, your pastors are always willing to walk with you through such moments. And also...feel free to surprise us with the news that does not need our knees to fall in prayer. It is just as much privilege to hear about the birth of a grandchild; a new job; the last chemo treatment moving towards remission; the biopsy that returns clear; the child’s acceptance to college; the graduation; and of course, the next location of the newest Starbucks.

All that being said, last week, was full of surprise, not once, but twice - joy filled and meaningful moments that caught me fully unaware. The first surprise happened at JOLT last Thursday. In teaching about the first article of Apostles’ Creed – you know, “I believe in God the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth.” The 6th graders began discussing all that God wants for their lives and all that God does not want for their lives. Because if I am going to confess my faith in “God the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth,” I am certainly wanting to affirm what God does and what God does not want for my life. And one very quiet student, who I may not have heard one word from in the 2 and ½ years I have known them, when I asked them what was one thing God does not want for their life – they answered – discrimination – and the room of 6th graders went silent. It was an honest answer from a young person who has already known more discrimination in their young life than anyone should know in their whole life. And in that moment not only was I surprised, but so was every other student in the room – who heard them speak for the very first time – through their shyness – to proclaim that the God who created them certainly did not create them to experience discrimination. The second surprise happened on Monday – a group of courageous members tackled the buckthorn conundrum in our Memorial Gardens two Saturdays ago. Last Sunday, I was told that the Buckthorn was tackled with gusto and I thought “yeah, okay.” But upon a visit to the Ash Garden – the wall of Buckthorn was indeed humbled some 12 feet back from the edge of the path to the Ash Garden. I was impressed but not surprised – I have seen the passion of so many of you for so many things to the glory of God – so why should the eradication of the Buckthorn not be a passion to bring beauty to the Ash Garden and joy to all who walk that path to say goodbye to loved ones and remember and reflect. But it was Monday night when I walked out to my car that a bright light was shining in the Memorial Gardens. A light I knew was not there four nights before. At first, I believed I was having a religious experience. A miracle, perhaps. An angel’s visit. Is this my chance to make it into the Bible? And so, I walked towards the light – which is fine for all of us under 55 – the rest of you stay away from the light for as long as you can. Please. And as I walked toward the blinding light – I realized the entire tree was lit with white light – think burning bush but nothing on fire. The surprise was the lighting of the tree – a surprise to me. And at the base of the tree – easily read – the words of the One who died for us and rose again for us – to speak a promise to us. “Do not let your hearts be troubled! Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house are many rooms.”

It is All Saints Sunday. A day, I confess, that causes my heart both joy and grief to reflect on the faces of those who have felt the last touch of a loved one’s warmth in this life only to open their eyes to the warmth of God’s presence and love on their faces in the Kingdom of Heaven. They are faces that hold story after story. And in every candle lit, there is at least one name – if not many – and at least one story, if not many swirling in the smoke that whispers from the flame. We are not so fancy, here at Ascension – or in most Lutheran Christian circles – that we bring out bowls of incense to bless altar or people. No worries, if it might be too much for you, the traditions of church that raised me never brought incense into worship. But what we miss, is the smoke rising all around us – lifting our eyes, as the psalmist reminds us, and our prayers up to the heavenly throne



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room. So, for me, each candle lit, whispers a prayer to the gates of heaven – and on this day – every candle lit – carries a name as well. Even now, some of you are searching the candles for the one you lit with the name of someone or the names of several someones you still love and grieve in their absence in this season in your life. Do not fear – you are in good company – if not for the person sitting beside you or in front of you – certainly, for the pastor standing before you.

So, today, as you sit among the dancing flames of candles that whisper the name and memory of someone you love who has walked the road of eternal life before us, do not forget that you are blessed in this life for the blessing a loved one offered to you. And maybe today, you would hear, would feel that blessing in a new way, as the veil between heaven and earth stands thinner and more translucent than on other days of the year. Blessed are you, in the terrible wonderful now, fumbling around for the right words. You need so much, and it seems impossible to say at all. Blessed are you for prayer that feels...hopeless. Disappointing. Futile. Blessed are you in your radical honesty. In the ways you speak of your grief –the long sleepless nights in an empty bed. Of the physical pain you feel –the joints that don't work like they used to, your brain fog or chronic pain. Blessed are you who speak of your loneliness, the empty house, or nest or womb - who have the audacity to ask for the miracles you need. The healing or a new friend or a redeemed family. Blessed are you as you learn to trust. Trust a God who hears, who listens, who hasn't left your side. Who tends on your behalf, interpreting those deep groans you can't quite put into syllables or sounds. Blessed are you as you settle into acceptance. Blessed are we who live here...in the someday soon but not yet. Blessed are you who have worked hard to keep your heart soft. You who live with courage, fixing what is in your reach, praying about what is not, and loving, still. Blessed are we, somewhere unnamable, fully present to our reality. Blessed are we, dear ones, not calling it just yet. Not settling for the neat and buttoned up, the too tied-up, the not-quite-true. Blessed are we, the ones who have just discovered that others might not look at things the way we do. Blessed are we realizing that our fixes for others might actually be mirrors to hold up first for ourselves. And blessed are we, seeing that you Lord, desire our good above all, we give you our worship and praise through our readiness to turn to you. Bless all of it, Lord God, that we might widen our gaze to encompass and embrace. And bless us, moving into the unknown, waiting, daring to hope.

What does the Apostle Paul share in this letter to the Christians in Ephesus, “In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory. I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may perceive what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power.” This is the blessing of “God the Father, the Almighty. Creator of heaven and earth. And in receiving this blessing, may you hear one more: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. "Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven. This is God's promise to us. A promise we proclaim with every candle lit to chase away the darkness. A promise we proclaim with the name of every saint we remember. A promise we speak with every: Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Blessed are you, who bear the surprise of the light, in unbearable times. Blessed are you, in whom the light lives, in whom the brightness blazes, in unaccountable faith, in stubborn hope, in love that illuminates every broken thing it finds. Thanks be to God! Amen.