



“Would They Believe Their Eyes?”

Text: 1 John 3:1-3

a sermon by Kevin Fleming

All Saints' Celebration November 5, 2017

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

There is something about the observance of All Saints' that captures and stirs the imagination. The image with which we began worship is of the great congregation of God's people, gathered around the throne of God, offering worship and praise. When the question is asked as to their identity, the answer comes back that they are those who have come out of the great tribulation – the time of testing and trial – the ordeal that we call life – and now stand forever in the presence of their God, robed in white and waving the palm – the symbol of everlasting life.

It is not by accident that we observe All Saints' Day in a time of the year when the darkness is deepening and the shadows grow. As the world moves into the dark days of late autumn and winter, when the world itself seems to die, we are reminded of the fragility of life, our mortality, and the absence of loved ones and dear ones, who have gone on to the next adventure with God. We recall their lives, their stories, their examples, their faithfulness. We remember them and in those memories we find blessings upon blessings.

In my own imagination, I sometimes wonder whether they know what is going on here and now. The Bible seems conflicted on the subject. In some parables and teachings, the implication is that the dead know what we are doing and going through here and now. In other places, the idea is that if the dead in the peace and pleasure of heaven knew what was going on here, they would have neither peace nor pleasure. Who knows?

But, for the purpose of the sermon this morning, let's suppose they don't. Let's just imagine for the next few minutes that the dead have no idea of what has been going on here on Planet Earth since they left it. And then, let's imagine that suddenly they return for a brief time to check in on us and our lives. The question is, "Would They Believe Their Eyes?"

So, imagine that someone from long ago, who has had no update on information since they died, came back to be with us.

Imagine what they would think of our grocery stores. A lot of our ancestors didn't have grocery stores. They grew what they needed and if it couldn't be grown, they did without it. What would their response be to all the different varieties of lettuce, apples, and onions? How would we explain kale? Imagine their amazement at being able to fill a cart with milk and butter and eggs and not own a cow or a chicken!

Imagine what they would think of a microwave. I remember when my family got the first microwave, and it took hours to explain it to my grandmothers. And even then, I don't think they believed we were telling the truth.

And what would they say about driving up to a building, having someone hand you ready-made food through a window, and driving away? Come to think of it, what would they think about driving and cars? A lot of our ancestors had no experience of anything run by an internal combustion engine. Think about those ancestors of ours who traveled in covered wagons and covering between eight to twenty miles per day without the benefit of paved roads. Some of you traveled that far just to get here this morning. And you will go home in the same day. What would they think of that?

And what would they say about air travel, because a lot of them never stepped in a plane. What would they think of flying across the Atlantic Ocean in five or six hours?

And what would they think of our houses? What would they think of our furniture? What would they think of the machines in our houses that make life easy? What would they think of heating and air conditioning?

Turn your imagination loose and think about all the things we take for granted that they never could have imagined. Put a list together with your family and friends this afternoon. I mean, "would they believe their eyes?"

Bring your imagination and your imaginings to this corner - South East Second and Mulberry Streets. What would our ancestors from the last nearly two hundred years have to say? Would they believe their eyes?

I like to take some time, every now and then, and linger in the cross hallway that holds so much of our history. I like looking at the pictures of all the antecedent churches. Do you remember that we started out in a glorified corn crib, over where First Baptist Church is? People showed

up early on Sunday mornings to sweep it out and clean things up from whatever animals had called it home on Saturday night. The pulpit was a dry goods box and the congregation sat on rough cut slabs turned into primitive benches. You could probably fit eight or ten of that corn crib into this space.

The Little Church on the Hill was the next building and it was a glamorous palace compared to the corn crib. But, compared to this, it was plain and simple. Other church buildings and congregations were built and established. They were amazing buildings. But finally they came here, to this corner and built this building, bit by bit. They handed it on to us as an inheritance. And I wonder, if they came back today, “would they believe their eyes?”

There are those ancestors who would be amazed that we have a building in which to worship. They didn't. There are those ancestors who would be confounded that we can worship openly and freely. They couldn't. There are those who would be amazed that we sing hymns. They didn't. There are those who would be infuriated that we have musical instruments. They refused to.

Carpets and cushions. Stained glass and creaturely comforts. No fear of recrimination or dread at the idea of being arrested and imprisoned for worshipping God. “Would they believe their eyes?”

The saints of God – from ages past – could not possibly imagine what their spiritual descendants would have today. We received it, in no small part, because they passed it on to us. There is an old saying that goes, “if you see a turtle on a fence post, you know it didn't get there by itself.” We are turtles, you and I. We didn't get here by ourselves. Not by a long shot. Whether it is our world, our nation, or our church, we didn't get here by ourselves. We had a lot of help.

Our ancestors struggled and sacrificed so we could have what we have. To fail to remember that is to be a little too much like the Prodigal Son, who asked for his inheritance before his father had died. That's a level of ingratitude you never want to achieve.

These saints of God – children of God, just like you and me – believed and lived that belief, offering up whatever they had for the cause of God's Kingdom. Sometimes that was time and talent and treasure. They gave for the glory of God and for the proclamation of God's good news throughout the world. And, some, laid down their lives, rather than deny God's presence and calling.

This is the faith of the saints. It is self-sacrificing, unselfish, and thoughtful. It is noble, generous, and altruistic. It is a faith that is quick to deny the wants and pleasures one desires for oneself, in order to provide the necessities and needs of another. It is a faith that takes a long view, rather than the satisfaction of the immediate and instantaneous.

One last question. If the saints of God from ages past could come back for just a few hours, and if they took a good look at us, would they believe their eyes? Would they see people of faith, living in faith, shining light into a darkened world? Would they see people living in hope, doing justice, practicing kindness, living in peace with others? Would they see people who care for the hungry, the thirsty, the sick, the homeless, the forgotten, the lonely, and the mistreated? What would they see when they look at us?

May we follow their example. May we live as they lived. May we practice our faith as they practiced their faith. And as their memory blesses us, may we live so that our memory is a blessing for generations. For now and evermore. Amen.



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