



ST. ANDREW'S IN THE PINES EPISCOPAL CHURCH

SERMON

All Saints Day – Nov. 1, 2012

The time is the start of the second century – about 200 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. The place is Northern Africa where two young women have been arrested, imprisoned, put on trial and condemned to death. One of the women, Perpetua is from a wealthy, noble family. She is married and the mother of a nursing infant. The other woman, Felicitas, is her serving maid, her slave, who follows her mistress. As they wait in prison for the day of their death by wild beasts in the public amphitheater, Perpetua's father uses his influence to visit his daughter and entreat her to come back home. This is her response to him. "Father, do you see this vase there, for example, or waterpot, or whatever? Yes, I do, he said. She responded, Could it be called by any other name that what it is? No, he replied. Well, so too I cannot be called by any other name than what I am, a Christian."

She refused to renounce her identity as a Christian – the reason for her impending death. And on the evening before the contest with the wild beasts, Perpetua had a vivid dream. She saw an enormous crowd watching, but no wild beasts were let loose. Then out came a vicious looking man, together with some helpers to fight with her. Then also out came some handsome men to help her. Then out came a marvelous, wonderful looking man with a green branch on which were golden apples. And he quieted the crowd and announced that if the vicious looking man could defeat Perpetua in combat, he would slay her with the sword, but if she was victorious, she would receive the branch. Then he withdrew and the battle began. The opponent grabbed her feet but she kept hitting him. She was raised in the air and she still kept hitting his face with her feet. There was a lull and she got ahold of his head. They both fell to the ground and she stepped on his head. The crowd began to shout and the helpers sang Psalms. Perpetua walked to the announcer and took the branch. He kissed her and said, Peace be with you, my daughter. Then she walked in triumph towards the Gate of Life. What Perpetua woke from this dream she realized then that her battle was not with wild animals but with the Devil and she would win the victory.

Perpetua and Felicitas would die the next day in the arena and their story would be recorded and remembered in "The Acts of the Christian Martyrs." These two women are true examples of some of the Saints that we remember and honor this morning. Martyrs – those whose heroic witness to the Christian faith were noted as early saints – people who the apostle Paul asked us all to imitate. Paul wrote often to the early Christian churches and suggested that they either imitate him or other baptized witnesses in order to learn to live as a Christian in a world often hostile to their faith and identities. Paul encouraged us to be someone like Perpetua who said, "I cannot be called by any name other than what I am, a Christian."

Perpetua is someone we could have dressed like on Wednesday for Halloween, but I bet none of us did? Probably none of us knew of her or remembered her. Instead we picked other identities – like sports heroes or cartoon characters or popular TV people or fantasy creatures from books and movies. It is fun for us to imagine and dress up like someone else. That, I think, is part of the fun of Halloween – the chance to take on a new identity for awhile – to be someone imaginary or different from your regular, old self. I don't know about you, but I can even transform my personality to fit my new identity. I remember the year I dressed as Peg, from the

old sitcom, *Married with Children*, for that is what I was; married – with children. Boy, did I have fun that day copying Peg’s looks and identity. I’ve never been ogled so much in my life – it actually got irritating. But you see, there is transforming power in how we clothe ourselves and the identity we take on. For who doesn’t remember dancing around as a princess or fighting bad guys as a soldier or knight or super hero? We form ourselves and are formed by how we are clothed.

That is why Perpetua told her father that after her baptism she was clothed with Christ and could no longer be anyone else. To be clothed with Christ at baptism was nearly literal in the second century. Baptism was done as an adult. On the day of your baptism you removed all of your old clothing, were coated with oil, and immersed completely in the waters of baptism. When you came out of the water, you were clothed in a new white robe which you did not take off for at least a week. This white robe was an outward sign of your new identity as one clothed with Christ. To be clothed in the white robe reminded you every day that you were a new creation. As we can read in Revelations – those who enter into heaven, those who endure to the end, are those dressed in white.

Consider that metaphor as Jesus demands that the dead Lazarus be unbound – that the strips of cloth binding him be unwrapped. “Unbind him and let him go.” Jesus says – and Lazarus enters into new life. To be stripped naked, to have our old, binding garments removed makes us vulnerable, open to transformation. We can become new creations.

And this can be good, but perhaps only partially. For as we have learned from our Halloween and childhood experiences – the identities we imagine ourselves to be aren’t really us. We cannot authentically live anyone else’s story, nor should we. We can only live our own. And if we are striving for an ideal of who we wish to become or are looking to others as witnesses and examples – the transformation we undergo must only be into becoming fully who we were created to be – in our own unique way of living. And perhaps when we know ourselves in this real way we will begin to know ourselves as God has clothed us. It will be clothing fashioned for us and it will be clear that our holiness is not ours alone, but God’s. Like Perpetua, we will understand that at our baptism we were clothed with Christ.

Because most of us, if not all of us, were baptized as infants and probably baptized in churches that merely sprinkled the waters of baptism on us. We never entered into the waters and came out to be clothed in white. And yet, that symbolism is still present for us and will be celebrated again this morning with Klaire Hecht. So let us all take some time to imagine what it is to be clothed with Christ.

Take a few moments to close your eyes and imagine yourself in a place that is holy for you. It may be a church, or in nature, or any location where you can be open to an encounter with Christ. Become comfortable and open.

Imagine that in front of you there is a sunburst-like globe of light, radiant and alive. Through this image let yourself be open to God’s light. Within that globe of light, let the Christ begin to appear in a human-like form, shining with this light. You can let your image of Christ become very realistic, like portraits of Jesus you’ve seen or imagined. Or you can let this shining humanity appear to you as Christ wills.

Reverently enter this light-body of Christ. Let yourself be surrounded by this Christ-light, clothed in Christ-nature. Let it suffuse you, fill you, flow through your body, your feelings, your thoughts, and any clothes you are wearing. You may find yourself remaining separate and distinct or imaginatively “becoming” Christ for awhile.

Resting in this light, you may wish to bring into your heart and mind situations in your life that need pondering or healing. Contemplate them as if this light were filling the situations.

When it seems good for you and Christ to conclude, remember your own shape and appearance clearly. Thank the living God of light for whatever graces you have received, and let the light fade around you, remembering

that it shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it. We are all being transformed from one degree of glory to another.

Clothed with Christ – WE ARE THE SAINTS.

Thanks be to God.