

*All Saints Sunday 2005, 6.xi.05, 10:00 EST  
Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saint James the Apostle / Brogue,  
Pennsylvania  
Revelation 7:9-17; Psalm 34:1-10; I John 3:1-3; Matthew 5:1-12  
Holy Eucharist · LBW Setting 2 · Lighting of Memorial Candles*

*J. J. !*

GRACE TO YOU AND PEACE FROM GOD OUR FATHER AND FROM  
OUR LORD AND SAVIOR, JESUS CHRIST! ✠ AMEN.

*“Blessed are those who mourn,  
for they will be comforted.”  
—Matthew 5:4*

*“... and God will wipe away every tear  
from their eyes.”  
—Revelation 7:17c*

This is the Sunday following All Saints Day, November 1<sup>st</sup>, and it is the Sunday preceding Veteran’s Day, November 11<sup>th</sup>. It is a Sunday one could say, falling between heaven and hell, the heaven of the Church Triumphant and the hell of war.

The 'All Saints' of All Saints Day did not originally refer to all the faithful departed and to our common Christian hope for eternal life in Christ and the Church Triumphant. It was originally a day on which to commemorate those thousands of unnamed and unknown martyrs who died in the popular riots and state-directed persecutions of the early Christian communities. These included those Christians, such as the ones who were thrown to wild beasts in arenas at Rome and around the Roman empire as sport and entertainment for the masses and as a sacrifice to the pagan gods of Rome. For these, and for others whose mortal remains were mutilated and simply abandoned or discarded by their persecutors, there were no graves, no tombs, no final bodily resting place to which Christians could come, as they did for other martyrs, to have a festive meal together and to share the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper in remembrance of His martyrdom for us all. For them, the Unknown Martyrs, All Saints Day was first set aside.

By extending the scope of this feast day, we Protestants have included *all* the Christian dead and even those good, kind and godly persons who have died and, we pray and hope with good reason, have fallen asleep in God's mercy to awaken forever in His glory. Unlike Roman Catholics and Anglicans, we Lutherans do not observe a separate 'All Souls Day' on November 2<sup>nd</sup>, so this day, together with Memorial Day, is really our time to commemorate *our* dead. We will do this very thing today as we light memorial candles for those dear to us who have passed from this life since All Saints 2004. This day is all we have in our Lutheran Church calendar for such a commemoration, and we are grateful for it.

Veterans Day has undergone a similar tasteful transformation. It was originally not called 'Veterans Day,' but rather '*Armistice Day*,' the commemoration of the signing of a ceasefire between the warring powers of World War I, the signing of a peace of paper at the 11<sup>th</sup> hour of the day, Central

European time, on the 11<sup>th</sup> day of the 11<sup>th</sup> month, November, in the year 1918. My mother still insists on calling it this, and she recalls as a schoolgirl in the years following World War I that, on that day and precisely at that hour, her teacher and the entire class would rise from their desks and stand, silently for one minute, breaking that silence finally with the Lord's Prayer. Of course, the Armistice of 1918 proved to be only the postponement of an even more terrible resumption of hostilities only two decades hence, but the hope for peace and the prayer for peace was fervent and solemn in those intervening years

It was a war to defend an Orthodox Christian little brother country, a war for Christ and for Holy Mother Russia, peasant soldiers were told by the Czar and the Patriarch of Moscow. It was a war to defend Christian culture and honor, God and Kaiser and Fatherland, the German and Austrian and Hungarian soldiers were told by their emperors and Churches. The Muslim Turks, allied with the Christian Crusaders of Germany and

Austria-Hungary, were sent into battle by the Sultan and by the Grand Imam of Constantinople to defend Islam from the infidel (with whom they were also allied) with the sword, the rifle and the artillery shell. It was a war to defend the land, the liberty and the sacred glory of France, French soldiers were told by the Assembly and by the Church that blessed their weapons and rallied them under the banner of Saint Joan. It was a war to defend the British Empire and a war against militarism and dashed unfair play, Prime Minister Lloyd George told the British 'Tommyes.' No one needed to tell the Belgians why they had to fight, as the enemy had occupied half their country and had dealt harshly with the civilian insurgency. This was the 'War to End All Wars,' so the American 'doughboys' were told by President Wilson when our country entered the conflict in 1917 to repay the French our debt of gratitude to them for helping us to win our war of independence from Great Britain. For all these reasons they died in their millions, more *military* combat

deaths and casualties with disfiguring wounds and permanently disabling injuries in Europe than in World War II, and twice again as many through the twin plagues of influenza and dysentery.

“My dearest sister,” a German soldier in his late teens wrote in his last letter home from the Western Front in 1918:

“. . . how I long to see you and to embrace you, and how I wish I could be home for Pappa’s birthday. But, even if we were granted leave now, which is impossible, I am not sure if I would have the strength to do anything but sleep. We are all so endlessly tired here, tired of mud and of sickness, tired of fighting and of death. The only reason we fight is to stay alive. And today a terrifying thought occurred to me. I cannot remember how this all started, what this war is supposed to be about. We do not bear any ill will toward the Tommies or the Amis or the French. I am sure they all want to go home as much as we.”

For him, that homecoming was never to be.

Do we call Armistice Day ‘Veteran’s Day,’ so that we will *forget*, rather than remember the enemy sons and civilians whom war destroys through this man-made death, through this

failure of the politicians to make peace where rights are in conflict and to keep peace where it has been established? I included all of these, military *and* civilian casualties of all wars, in a prayer which I was invited by the local VFW and American Legion to give on one November 11<sup>th</sup>, something they never invited me to do again. Is there *one* tomb of a single unknown soldier from every war so that the people will think of the one, rather than of the *millions*, as a disillusioned officer of the French Army War Graves Commission suggested in the 1920's? I wonder.

Today, our nation is at war with those who glorify war, with those bent on killing both kinsman and foreigner, not so that the future may be better for their children, but so that they and their children may die a glorious death. We hear reports of the American bodies recovered and returned home, now over 2,000 of them. We hear that Ramstein Air Force Base Hospital, Walter Reid Hospital and the Brooks Medical Center are full of the

wounded, most of them amputees. May God forgive me for saying it if I am wrong, and if the leaders of our country are wrong, but I see no other choice for our own survival and for that of our children and our children's children.

Of course, no one ever does see any other choice. That is why nations go to war or, rather, *send* the young to war. You have often heard me pray 'for those who serve in foreign wars *in our stead.*' I will not stop praying that prayer as long as this war lasts, for it is true. They fight because the generation of their parents and grandparents could not think of a better destiny for the world. They fight in *our* place, and we are not worthy of them or of their loss. Those of you who *are* veterans, who *have* lost comrades or limbs or the life you might have had without war know this to be true. God bless you for not holding the rest of us in contempt.

The British poet and Army officer of the First World War, Wilfrid Owen, frames this thought perfectly in what is to me his

most poignant poem, written either in the trenches of France or in the Army field hospital where he was being treated for wounds, prepared to go back to the front and to his death in the last week of the 'Great War':

*Greater Love*

Red lips are not so red  
As the stained stones kissed by the English dead.  
Kindness of wooed and wooer  
Seems shame to their love pure.  
O Love, your eyes lose lure  
When I behold eyes blinded in thy stead!

Your slender attitude  
Trembles not exquisite like limbs knife-skewed,  
Rolling and rolling there  
Where God seems not to care;  
Till the fierce Love they bear  
Cramps them in death's extreme decrepitude.

Your voice sings not so soft,—  
Though even as wind murmuring through rafters loft,—  
Your dear voice is not dear,  
Gentle and evening clear,  
As theirs whom none now hear,  
Now earth has stopped their piteous mouths that coughed.

Heart, you were never hot,  
Nor large, nor full like hearts made great with shot;  
And though your hand be pale,  
Paler are all which trail  
Your cross through flame and hail;  
Weep, you may weep, for you may touch them not.

It is well to think on these questions, not only because our country finds herself once again at war, but also as we

commemorate our own dead. For most of us these are the casualties not of war, not of natural disaster but casualties simply of life. The few candles we will light today each stands for a life and for a memory. In your heart and mind, as in mind, that one candle may seem to burn with a brightness that blinds us to all the others, and to sear our soul with a pain that leaves no room for the pain of others. But these tiny flickers are but reflections of a larger flame that burns around the world, in Christian churches and in Hebrew synagogues, in Buddhist temples and in Hindu mandirs, and also in the mosques of those who may see us as their enemies even more than we do them as ours. Our loss, our pain, the great void left in our lives by those who have gone where we cannot yet go is *one*. The secret that is unlocked when we reach that insight is that—the whole history of war notwithstanding—*we* are one. God grant the peoples of the earth who have learned this at such bitter cost through war, to reach out to one another through their tears to peace.

Still, even as peace eludes us, to us and to all who will hear His voice, to all who will not turn away from Him as He gathers humanity to Him, He says to us who mourn, *'Blessed are you!'* *'Happy are you!'* You are not blessed because you have already received comfort, but because you *will* receive it, because their *will* be wholeness where there is now only a void, because there *will* be reunion, where there is now only separation, because you will hear your name spoken as only that *one* can speak it. For this reason, because of your *hope* in God which is proclaimed to you now but is *yet* to be realized, beyond the riddle of suffering and death, beyond the stupidity and the utter waste of war against which we are forced to defend ourselves *by* war, beyond all this, and beyond this point of our mourning and our loss, *He* calls us Who passed through death to eternal life. ✠ Amen.



NOW TO HIM WHO LOVES YOU AND HAS FREED YOU FROM YOUR  
SINS BY HIS BLOOD, TO HIM BE GLORY AND DOMINION WITH THE  
FATHER AND THE HOLY SPIRIT, NOW AND FOREVER! ✠ AMEN.

*S. D. G.!*