

## “All the Saints”

Revelation 7:9-17 • Psalm 34:1-10, 22 • 1 John 3:1-3 • Matthew 5:1-12

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All Saints' Day

Today is a special day in the life of church. We call it “All Saints’ Day.” It is actually *three* days rolled into one. Sometimes people wonder what, exactly, this day is all about, so I’m going to briefly explain it, before we read the names of your loved ones who died over the course of this past year.

Beginning in the early centuries of Christianity, local churches held annual commemorations for beloved Christians who had died, as a way to remember them and honor their memory. This was especially true for the martyrs of the faith, people who had been killed because of their Christian faith and convictions. In the New Testament we read about the murder of Stephen, one of the first Deacons, and the execution of James, one of the twelve apostles. Over time, other noteworthy Christians came to be remembered as well, usually on the anniversary of their death, the date they entered God’s eternal Kingdom, but also collectively, once a year, on a date chosen by the local church or bishop. Originally there was not one widely-established date for such a commemoration, but it was typically held sometime around Easter or Pentecost. By the year 800, for reasons that are not entirely clear, many churches in northern Europe had changed the date to November 1. In the ninth century, the Roman Catholic Church formally established November 1 as the official date of All Saints’ Day. But the Eastern Orthodox Church continued to observe the older practice of commemorating the church’s martyrs and saints in the spring, on the first Sunday after Pentecost. To this day, many different branches of the church continue to hold the annual commemoration on one of those two dates.

But typically, these commemorations were just for Christian martyrs and other noteworthy Christians who had been officially recognized as “saints” by the church, like the Apostle Paul, or major theologians like Augustine, or other Christians who were known for particularly noteworthy deeds. Many Christians wanted a day when they could remember their beloved friends and relatives whose names didn’t get included on those narrowly-defined “official” lists. When could they hold a special commemoration for their parents and grandparents, husbands and wives, friends and children? Churches responded to this heartfelt desire, and so was born *All Souls’ Day*, or the Commemoration of the Faithful Departed, which was celebrated on November 2, the day after All Saints’ Day. Thus, on November 1, Christians remembered the martyrs and famous saints of the church, and the next day they remembered everyone else they loved. By this point, All Saints’ Day was sometimes called “All *Hallows’ Day*,” the idea being that these saints were especially *hallowed* by God; God had blessed them with a special degree of *holiness*. The remembrance of those saints typically began with a candlelight Vespers service on the evening before, “All *Hallows’ Eve*.” So it became a *three-day* celebration: All *Hallows’ Eve* on October 31, All Saints’ Day on November 1, and All Souls’ Day on November 2. Together, the three days came to be called “Allhallowtide,” a trio of days to venerate the faithful dead.

Some things changed during the Protestant Reformation. First, the Reformers objected to the idea that only *some* Christians were worthy of the title “saint.” They pointed back to the New Testament, where the word “saint” is commonly used to refer to *all* the members of the church. To give just one example out of many: in the first line of his letter to the Ephesians, Paul says he is writing “to the *saints* who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ Jesus.” He’s not writing the letter to just *some* of the Christians in Ephesus; he wrote the letter to *all* of them. The basic principle is that *every* Christian is called to be a saint; we are *all* called to be a “holy one” of God. So the Reformers objected to the distinction between the “saints” who were commemorated on November 1 and the “souls” who were commemorated on November 2. Additionally, the Reformers also objected to the idea that dead people still need our prayers, which was a fairly common belief, and prayers for the dead were typically offered on November 2. So they eliminated All Souls’ Day, and modified All Saints’ Day so that it would include commemorations of *all* faithful departed. Some Protestants – like the Puritans – went further and eliminated All Saints’ Day all together. So depending on what church you belong to, there might or might not be an All Saints’ Day commemoration every year. Some denominations, like our own, do not mandate the practice; there are some Presbyterian churches that do not observe it at all.

All Hallows’ Eve also changed pretty significantly over time. You’ve probably already figured this one out. It gradually turned into the celebration we know today as “Halloween.” The Vespers service on All Hallows’ Eve was typically held inside the local church, and then following the service people would move to the local cemetery, to place candles on the graves of their loved ones. Well, over a long stretch of time, All Hallows’ Eve, like Valentine’s Day and St. Patrick’s Day, became secularized. In centuries past, poor children would go door-to-door on All Hallows’ Eve to collect little cakes of bread, marked with a cross, in exchange for offering their prayers for the homeowners’ deceased relatives. That practice very gradually morphed into “trick-or-treating.” Those children would carry candles to light their way; those candles were carried in carved-out turnips for safety. Turnips eventually gave way to pumpkins. And so on. The history of Halloween is rather fascinating!

One final change over time was that many branches of the Christian church, especially here in the U.S., began observing All Saints’ Day on the first Sunday of November, instead of the first *day* in November. The Roman Catholic Church still holds to the date of November 1, regardless of what day of the week November 1 happens to fall on. There are several dozen countries around the world with such a strong history of observing All Saints’ Day that November 1 is a public holiday. We are not one of those countries; the only international Christian celebration that became a public holiday here is Christmas. So because November 1 is a day when a lot of people have to work, many Protestant traditions, like ours, moved the observance of All Saints’ Day to the first Sunday in November.

And that, briefly, is what has led to our celebration today. Here at our church we used to call this day “Remembrance Sunday,” and sometimes we still do, although the better term is “All Saints’ Day,” to connect it with the very old Christian festival that is still celebrated all around the world. “Remembrance Sunday” is an annual observance in the United Kingdom, on the *second* Sunday of November, near Armistice Day, to honor and remember servicemen and women in the two World Wars and subsequent wars. “Remembrance Sunday” is the equivalent of Veterans Day; it’s a *national holiday*, not a traditional *Christian festival*. So let’s get in the habit of calling *this* day “All Saints’ Day.”

So, without further ado, let us observe the centuries-old, internationally-recognized Christian celebration of All Saints’ Day, calling to remembrance the names of our dearly beloved friends and family members who have passed into God’s eternal Kingdom over the course of the past year.

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