

“God Unmasked”
John 7 (the entire chapter)
All Saints Sunday; November 1, 2020

In the early church, religious holidays — like Christmas, Easter, the festivals of Ascension and Pentecost — were not just one-day events but multi-day festivals. So was “All Hallow-Tide,” three days of



honoring those whose lives were lost in time of trial. “All Hallow-Eve” was the start of this time of worship and prayer

for the departed saints. It was initially held in the spring — spring — symbolic for resurrection.

In the 8th century, however, the church declared “All Saints” an “official” church solemnity and

moved it to the end of October. The move was likely intended to correlate it with secular celebrations of the harvest. But as time went on,



the theology of the solemnity evolved as prayers for the souls of those in

“purgatory” (All Souls) were combined with those of the saints (All Saints). An all-night prayer vigil came before the first of the feasts.

In early rural England, pancakes, curds, and hard cider would be served the evening before. During the meal there would be a reciting of Psalm 130, the “De Profundis” (Latin, meaning “From the Depths”). Everybody would then go to bed as a courier roamed the streets ringing a bell in warning to stay inside. Why? Because it was thought that on the eve of All Souls, those in purgatory would have their yearly moment of rising — and God forbid, you got in their way.

The eve also became a time when beggars (angels in disguise?) would go door-to-door, asking for a precious piece of fruit or a “soul cake” which was a kind of pancake. In return for the cake, the beggar would promise to pray for those in the household who



had departed from this life. “A soul cake, a soul cake, have mercy on Christian souls for a soul cake.” That was chanted by the beggar who hoped to gain a meal. This chant would later become an English folk

song heard by many: “Soul, soul, an apple or two / If you haven’t an apple, a pear will do / One for Peter, two for Paul / Three for the Man Who made us all.” “All Souls” and “All Saints” eventually merged with medieval dramas acted-out depicting the fate of “costumed” souls.

As it is, this is the season of the year in which we celebrate a ritual of hiding and revealing, of masking and unmasking as it were — even as we are wearing masks in the midst of global pandemic. As Christians, we usually follow a night of revelry and make-believe masking (maybe not so much this year). For some of us, perhaps, the fasting and prayer of a night vigil — with a day of feasting, worship, prayer, and honor for all those departed-ones who have given their lives in the name of Jesus, as well as those in our churches and homes who have passed from this earth and into the realm of resurrection life. This is a day of revealing Jesus’s resurrection glory for all those who have held fast to him even in the throes of death.

I read to you a chunk from John’s gospel, where Jesus, too, plays a game of “hide” and “reveal” in the time leading up to the “final reveal” of his death and resurrection. Jesus knows his time is short. He also

senses that it's not quite time for the final countdown. So he proceeds cautiously, knowing that if he pushes too far, he may not accomplish all that God intends before he meets his destiny on the cross. He still has some things to say, some stories to tell, some rituals to reveal.

John's gospel tells us that it was the time of the Festival of Tabernacles. Coming probably from Galilee into Judea, the story tells us that Jesus's brothers taunt him about his attendance at the festival — mandatory for everyone in the family, especially the eldest son. Jesus's brothers don't believe in who he is and so they goad him to prove it and show his would-be disciples what he can do during the time of the festival. He's just a "wanna-be" public-figure, they say.

Jesus leaves after they do, no doubt stopping in Bethany, at the home of Lazarus, Mary, and Martha. He then proceeds on to Jerusalem in secret. He lays low initially, but when the time is right, he goes to teach in the Temple courtyard to a divided crowd. It's there that things get testy. Jesus and the Pharisees go at it about who Jesus is and who he's not.

One can almost imagine a spy movie, in which a James Bond-type character moves undercover and is interrogated by the bad guys. As the



Pharisees dispute Jesus’s identity, he reveals only what he wants them to know— until the time is right and he wins their game of “cat and mouse.”

Jesus speaks in “metaphors” that religious people like the Pharisees and others would recognize. This is the last day of the Festival of Tabernacles (Sukkot), when the ritual of Living Water would be performed at the Pool of Siloam. This was also when the “Lights of the World” around the Temple would be lit for all to see upon the hill surrounding Jerusalem. With this stage set, Jesus declares HIMSELF the Living Water, the Light of the World, the Son of the Father, and finally, the “I AM” existing from the beginning of time with God before Abraham and the patriarchs.

The metaphors aren’t lost on this crowd. Everybody’s here in Jerusalem for one of the most important festivals of the year — the festival of God’s presence, and the presence of all of the patriarchs and

matriarchs who have died before them. It's the festival of "with-ness," celebrating the God who continues to dwell among God's people.

Suddenly, Jesus goes "masks-off." He declares himself the Messiah, the God dwelling among them, the great I AM, who has come to pass judgment on Jerusalem, on the authorities, and to rescue God's people.

Jesus has been teaching and healing for almost 3 years as God's undercover "agent of change." (Perhaps "agent of redemption" is the better term.) And now his divine mission is quickly approaching its end. Jesus begins to reveal God's great thing for everybody who's willing to listen.

The one true God has always had a mission. From the moment of the fall, the mission has been to rescue and return God's lost and errant people, along with the earth in all of its ravishing beauty, to the joy and juice of a garden life, an everlasting life of peace and abundance with God in God's sovereign kingdom.

Throughout scripture, we witness God revealing the divine-self — in a burning bush, in the wind and fire of Mount Sinai, in the power of

the holy tabernacle, in a heavenly ladder, in a mysterious stranger, in the whirlwind of a fiery chariot. And now God is most fully revealed in the human flesh of his Son, Jesus of Nazareth. Whenever we see God revealed, you know something extraordinary is soon to occur. “What is hidden will soon be revealed,” says Jesus.

The mystery of God, the menu of metaphors about who God is, would soon become clear as day to each and every person. God is revealed in Jesus. God has come for all his faithful people. This God ascended into heaven — the same yesterday, today, and forever — and will be coming again. And on that day, all souls — of the righteous and unrighteous — will be raised, all lives will be accounted.

Jesus’s mission is the final action in an extraordinary salvation story that God put into play a long time ago — long before the beginning of time. Before the patriarchs, before the prophets, before the rise and the fall of Jerusalem, Jesus the Messiah was standing before Jerusalem and all of her people, saying, the time of God’s salvation has come. “I AM God among you.” “I AM the culmination of that promise.” “All of you who are thirsty, come to the waters and drink.” “I

the person of Jesus, un-masked and revealed, challenging to those who persecute others, protective of those who hurt.

Today we not only acknowledge those saints who have died, but those souls in pain, who cry out to the Lord for help and salvation. Jesus's good news is that HE is here. And his resurrection glory is ours whenever we believe in him in all of his power and presence.

This is OUR good news! This is YOUR good news! This is MY good news!

Jesus isn't just some guy on a mission in the 1st century.

Jesus isn't some dead guy whose memory we keep alive.

Jesus isn't just someone we read about in a history book.

Jesus isn't just some rabbi or prophet who tried to save the people of Jerusalem all those years ago.

Jesus is the great I AM! Jesus is here TODAY!

Jesus is even more powerful and present here today in this time and place, as he was those years ago while speaking to the crowds in that Temple courtyard in Jerusalem.

Because Jesus knew that the Great Reveal was still yet to come — the time of the resurrection! And that his resurrection would be a light to every one of us who stumbles around in the darkness of our own souls, wondering how and where to find a ray of hope. Jesus IS still that light for every one of us. Jesus is that hope for every soul in pain.

The scripture story today isn't just a one-off spat between Jesus and his foes. It's a message "in code" from our Master-in-Mission — God the Father — telling us that we will all be part of God's resurrection story! Someday we will all be in the communion of the saints.

And so, all you souls in doubt, all you souls in pain, all you souls walking around lost and not quite knowing how to find your way to love, comfort, peace, and hope, THIS is YOUR day. A day of victory! God's turning point in YOUR life.

Jesus is your soul cake. And even as you pray for those who came before you, Jesus is lifting you up, that you may experience his resurrection glory with him in God's beautiful kingdom.



Let us pray together, as we come forward to the table to partake of Jesus' gift to us — his power and his presence, his Holy Communion of love — Psalm 130, De Profundis, that was mentioned earlier:

Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord.

Lord, hear my voice!

Let your ears be attentive

to the voice of my supplications!

If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities,

Lord, who could stand?

But there is forgiveness with you,

so that you may be revered.

I wait for the Lord, my soul waits,

and in his word I hope;
my soul waits for the Lord
more than those who watch for the morning,
more than those who watch for the morning.
O Israel, hope in the Lord!
For with the Lord there is steadfast love,
and with him is great power to redeem.
It is he who will redeem Israel
from all its iniquities.
Amen.