“The Former Things Have Passed Away”

All Saints’ Sunday
Wisdom 3:1-9 (Apocrypha); Revelation 21:1-6a; John 11:32-44

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From the Pulpit
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A communion meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, November 6, 2016, All Saints’ Sunday, dedicated to all the saints of First Congregational Church who passed into eternal life in this past year - Carol Anna Helm Hussey, Van Vechten Barndt, Robert Hutchins (‘Tad’) Jeffrey II, Gerhard Karl Wolff, Wilbur Alan “Wib” Smith, Victor G. Campbell, Lucille Anne Kropp, Ann T. McIsaac, Charles Richard Grieser, Essie May Willis Cannon and to my friends and family - Denny Griffith, Mike Bowersock, Nancy Sitler Parker, my beloved father, Dr. Herman C. Ahrens, Jr. to all the saints held in our hearts & always to the glory of God!

“The Former Things Have Passed Away”

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

We all know there will be an end to things. Election campaigns end (56 hours to go but who is counting?). Tests
end. Struggle and difficulty ends. Yes, even sermons end. And of course, life ends.

Written from an island called Patmos, John penned His Revelation from God which is the final book of the Christian Scriptures. It has malicious monsters, lions, oxen, eagles and human faces all with six-wings covered over with eyes, a glassy sea, a bottomless pit, rivers of blood, cities of pure gold and these only a few of the images in John’s Revelation. Revelation and thus the Bible ends with these words – “Amen. Come Lord Jesus. The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints. Amen” (Revelation 22:21).

The Book of Revelation is not only the end of the Bible; it is about the end. We use the phrase “the end” in a two-fold sense. In one sense, “the end” means **final** – the end of a game, the last act of a play, the final movement of a symphony where the road ends, the last tick of the clock. But, in another sense the end also means the **purpose** of something – the result of the game, the meaning of the play, the finale of the symphony, the direction of the journey, the purpose of the past, the present and even the future. The end can be tremendously profound when it leads to something greater.

Revelation is more about purpose than finality. When the game is over, good will win. When the play is done, you will be
moved and touched and enlightened and inspired. When the journey ends, we will find out where we have been going. The present will be past and the future will be now. God will be holding us in the palm of God’s hand. We will discover that in the end our goal is communion and not oblivion. In the words of Revelation – our end is our beginning. (Drawn from William Willimon, On a Wild and Windy Mountain, Abington Press, 1984, pp. 139-140).

All of us, at some point, have faced the end of a life. On this All Saints’ Day, we feel this deeply.

When we lose someone we love, there are nights and days when we are inconsolable in our grief. We see to know the purpose of the end of their life. Why were they sick? Why did they lose memory and heartbeat; joy and focus? Why did they go so soon or linger so long? Why, in God’s name, are they in heaven and not on earth? What is heaven and what on earth is our purpose? What do we do now – with them gone? How do we move on?

We may have an answer once in a while. Our consolation comes when we remember the goodness of life which they taught us. One thing is sure: the former things do pass away. In Revelation’s end, we try to find a new beginning. We seek to find consolation in John’s Revelation. We try – with all our
might – to behold new things in this new reality of “first” things, “first” people, parents, grandparents, siblings, lovers and friends passing away before our eyes. We try to remember the goodness of the person that points us to hope.

In pursuit of trustworthy and true purpose in their ends, I venture to share a glimpse of the goodness of our ten sisters and brothers who have passed from earth to heaven. They are only glimpses – a tiny snapshot of people who lived amazing lives. Nothing said can contain the true beauty of the men and women whose lives we lift up.

**Carol Anna Helm Hussey died on All Saints Sunday in 2015.** She was a lifelong member of this church. Carol was a musician and a teacher and a great mom. She taught over 20 years at Main St. Elementary School and even more in the Columbus Schools over her lifetime. She went to places where others didn’t go and taught with love and a zeal for her children. She once said, “If I don’t teach them, who will?” She taught special education, behaviorally challenged children, music, and general elementary education. She was the kind of teacher who was the first in the morning and the last out at the end of the day. She was a gifted musician as well. playing French horn in the Columbus Symphony Orchestra. She was born to ten minutes late (while Frank was born to be ten minutes early) – so together they were on time - a match made
in heaven. Carol sang in the choir for over 50 years. Every Christmas season the choir looked forward to Carol’s special Pretzel, M& M treats. They disappeared in the blink of an eye. She was amazing.

**Van Vechten Barndt** – “I like that guy.” Van was an ambassador of love and a true disciple of Jesus Christ. With his smile, hugs, and love he was embodying the Christian life. Van loved people, all creation and life itself. When too many others do the opposite – Van made our faith in Christ look and feel good. By loving and living the way he did, Van made our faith appealing to others. He made life and the joy of living appealing to everyone. I really loved this guy. I really miss him.

**Tad Jeffrey** – At his memorial service I called Tad, “Columbus’ first citizen.” He was always giving himself to people, institutions and high values which he cherished. To echo the words of Socrates spoken over 2400 years before Tad, “I am not an Athenian or a Greek. I am a citizen of the world.” Over the course of a lifetime, Tad was not just a lover of Columbus – although that would have been enough. He was not just a citizen of Franklin County or Ohio or the United States of America – although all three were close to his dear heart. Tad was a global citizen. His was a love for the planet and its people. He was a friend to all. Friendship was at the
center of all he said and did. Few people I have known cared more about friends and friendship.

**Gerhard Wolff** – Growing up in Germany during the rise of Adolph Hitler, his mother was a part of the Confessing Church – started by Dietrich Bonhoeffer as Christians resisted Hitler’s reign of terror. He was “drafted” at gunpoint by the SS into battle at 16 years old. Then taken as a prisoner of war by the American troops Gerhard eventually made it to America as a young man. Then he stayed made a positive difference in our country. He was one of the kindest, gentlest, most thoughtful men I ever knew. He saw and experienced evil in a nation overtaken by a flamboyant dictator and from that he dedicated his life to peace. Some of the most heartfelt and meaningful conversations I had in my entire ministry happened with this gentle man.

In the late autumn of 1931, **Wilbur Alan Smith** walked from First Congregational Church, 74 East Broad Street to 444 East Broad Street and entered through the Broad Street doors of this building for the first time. He was four years old. It was a long walk in a parade of people who shaped and defined his life – many of them for generations to come. From this congregation 13 year later, a seventeen-year-old would leave school and enlist in the United States Navy to serve his nation in the Second World War. He would miss the action of
battle, but in the aftermath of war, he would witness the devastating effects of war as he served in the occupation forces in Japan. He was one of the last of the men and women from this congregation to have his name placed beside other names of the Wall of Honor in the southwest corner of our sanctuary. At his death in April, we buried the last soldier of the 230 who served in WWII from this congregation.

The day WIB entered through the portal of this gothic cathedral, he was swept away by its beauty and grandeur. He walked up the steps and passed below these words chiseled in stone above the grand entrance, “Enter to Worship - Depart to Serve.” These words would have an impact on WIB the rest of his life. He often said to me, “Our credo is simple. We worship and we serve God as we understand God.” WIB lived by these words. When he came to church, he entered to give himself to God – as he understood God. When he departed, he left to serve.

Dr. Vic Campbell was an amazing man. He worked so hard – throughout his life – to achieve and to overcome whatever was placed in his path. He chose to work in the south end of Columbus at Mercy Hospital in the neighborhood of his grandparents. With his PhD and his credentials as a master teacher and nurse he could have gone anywhere. But, he went where he felt he was most needed. There he made a difference.
Vic listened to people and really heard them. When we spoke words of love. He translated our love into more love. When we spoke words of hate and unkindness he heard us. He translated out words of hate and unkindness into love, too. He embodied the Christ-like characteristics of loving presence, listening presence, healing presence and kindness. He listened with his ears, his eyes, his hands and his heart. He was a healer and he made a difference in this world.

Lucille Kropp was a gift from God to so many of us. But, I imagine you did not know that Ludwig von Beethoven and Lucille Kropp had something in common. They both loved food. Soup in particular. Between composing one brilliant musical piece after another, Beethoven wrote, “Only the pure in heart can make a good soup.” Music for the ages begins at the kitchen table. Lucille and Ludwig knew this. Food was Lucille’s language of love. She loved cooking and baking. She loved eating with us. She loved feeding us too. When Lucille discovered what you liked to eat, she made it for you. And if you did not actually know what you liked, she made you something anyway – and then you fell in love with it and it became a favorite food. She loved God, food, and people – equally.

Ann McIsaac - Ann had a deep and abiding faith – though shaken in her losses – she was never broken in her grief. She was truly loving of all the pastors of this church. Having
grown up as a Presbyterian pastor’s daughter in the fishbowl parsonages of rural Pennsylvania during the depression, Ann had a sixth sense of the challenges of ministry. She knew hardship and struggle and yet she lived to serve. I cannot remember another Senior Deacon who was in the office each week and month folding bulletins and newsletters. She never missed.

So many of us have so many memories of Ann. To quote Dene Barnard, “She was ornery.” (I wonder how you are able to see that quality is someone, Dene?). He is right. She was ornery – ornery like a saint! Each week in the greeting line announcing the time of the sermon, her time on Church Council as Senior Deacon when she was the only “no” vote on a motion before Church Council. She said, “We agree too easily on everything. So, I vote no just to shake things up a bit.” Singing in the choir for 30 years, serving in every way possible in the life of the church. Half through our Bible Study of Jeremiah, Ann announced, “I don’t care if he is a prophet of the Lord. He is so depressing. Let’s just skip to the end of the story. I think he has a few words of hope there.” Thanks to Ann, we survived Jeremiah - skipping from Jeremiah 25 to all the good stuff at the end. But, despite her battles with the Apostle Paul, she turned to him when his beautiful words best defined her daily living of faith.
Charles Richard Grieser was an attorney who took more cases from Ohio to the Supreme Court of the United States than anyone in our history. He defended laborers and coal miners. He fought for “the little guy.” Also a WWII veteran, he was fiercely and joyfully independent. We would talk by phone and he would say, don’t take your time coming by, go see someone who is really sick. This was when he was 90+ active to the end. And a pledging member of First Church for over 65 years.

Essie May Willis Cannon (Assoc.) was one of the first people I met at First Church. On the Sunday in which I was called – November 21, 1999 – Essie gave the Offertory Invitation. She spoke with a powerful, clear voice challenging the congregation to step up and be generous. She had fire in her bones. But, her smile lit up the room. I thought, “I can’t wait to work with her.” Turns out, Essie was an Associate Member, the wife of Wallace Cannon. She spent most of time serving her beloved St. Thomas Catholic Church. Two of her five sons grew up here and three grew up in church at St. Thomas. At her funeral, a few weeks ago, her five amazing sons stood tall and strong – shoulder to shoulder – as raised their mother up to God. In the bulletin, it took three pages (Single space) to cover all of Essie’s accomplishments and achievements. It was clear to me, those five men and their
families were the heart and soul of this amazing woman of faith.

For Carol, Van, Tad, Gerhard, WIB, Vic, Lucille, Ann, Charles, Essie - Thanks be to God!

Many of us have lost loved ones this year. In a moment, we will lift up their names to God. In their end was their beginning, And in this time of living without them, may we find solace and peace in remembering their goodness and love. Thanks be to God! Amen.

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