I. INTRODUCTION

A. All Saints’ Day

Today we celebrate All Saints’ Day. Though its date is actually November 1st, this past Thursday, we move its celebration to today because of its importance.

All Saints’ Day is the Church’s Memorial Day. It is the day in which we remember the saints of all times and places.

B. The Notion of “Saint”

1. “Saint,” as “Holy One,” as “Separated”

The word “saint” is means “holy one.” To be “holy” is to be taken out of ordinary usage and dedicated to God’s use. Holiness is not primarily a moral designation. Rather, it refers to the fact that God has called us to faith in Jesus and has formed us into a community who worship God and who testify to God’s presence in the world.

As members of the Reformed tradition, we continue this New Testament understanding of “saint,” which sees it as referring to all the faithful, all those who heard Jesus’ call to follow and who responded.

2. The Martyrs

We cannot forget, however, that the saints the church first made special effort to remember were the martyrs, those put to death for the faith, those who made special “witness” (the original meaning of the word “martyr”) to Jesus by their own rejection and suffering.
3. Those Who Take Seriously Discipleship
   There is a certain specification this introduces into the notion of saint. It is not a simple matter of having one’s name on the books of a church. We regard as saints those people in our past and in our present who have taken discipleship seriously and consequently who have made Jesus present to us, who have led us to faith, who have guided our walk in faith, who have encouraged us and held us accountable. We may have shared the pew with others, but these people hold particular regard to us as saints.

C. Challenge: From Birth to Choice
   We are now experiencing the turning of a new page in the history of the church. Since the days of the Emperor Theodosius I (The Edict of Thessalonica, February 27, 380, in effect made the Christian Church the official religion of the Empire), membership in the church has been a matter of birth. Everyone born into a Christian family is baptized into the faith. We could, therefore, make assumptions that virtually everyone in the culture—who wasn’t Jewish or of another faith—was Christian. Consequently, we are all God’s saints.
   This time is past and its passing has been within our own lifetimes. The faith is no longer a matter now of birth, but rather a matter of choice. This poses particular challenges for us.

1. Greater Intentionality about Following Jesus in Community
   On the one hand, it means greater intentionality on our part about the faith. What does it mean to intentionally covenant together to follow Jesus?
   Our focus must shift from private faith to a faith lived in community.
   Our focus must shift from simply maintaining an institution to being an institution that knows its purpose as that of following, proclaiming, and serving Jesus in the world.

2. Witness to Those Who Do not Know Jesus
   On the other hand, no longer can the church replenish its membership by birth. Instead, it must be by a witness made to those who may have absolutely no clue as to whom Jesus is. This is something for which we are ill prepared, yet one we must prepare.
3. Precedence in Israel’s History and the Early Church – Return to Scripture

We would be mistaken were we to assume that this situation is unprecedented. The Hebrew people spent most of their lives in such a situation. The early church was a minority people, a people regarded by the larger culture with a mixture of apathy, suspicion, derision, and even of scapegoating persecution. For both Judaism and for the early church, these were the faith’s most vibrant times.

In particular, then, we are forced back into Scripture. The church today is engaged in an intentional reexamination of Jesus, and in those parts of the church’s history that mirrored our own times. We must answer anew, for ourselves, whom Jesus is and what it means as a community to follow him. We need to ask ourselves anew what it means to be Jesus’ saints.

D. Memory and Experienced Anticipation

Our readings today have us focusing upon Jesus and upon the difference he makes in our lives. They speak of God’s promise to destroy the power of death. They speak of past promises and God’s future intent for the world, which even now is making an impact.

1. Promises of Future End of Death

Isaiah said, “And he [God] will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever,” (Isaiah 25:7).

In the book of Revelation, John hears a loud voice from the throne saying, “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away,” (Revelation 21:3-4).

2. Martha Also Saw Resurrection as Future

We read these promises and sigh. We find ourselves saying, along with Martha, who in a dialogue that lies just outside the purview of our gospel reading, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day,” (John 11:24). In other words, Yea, yea, Martha as a Jew, and we as Christians, believe in resurrection. It is part of our creed. It awaits us in some unimaginable future. So distant is it in time, so removed is it from our daily experience, that it just hangs on the tree of faith like a piece of fruit far out of reach.
Meanwhile, we can ignore it and just go about the business of meeting today’s challenges as best we can.

3. Jesus Says that He is “The Resurrection” Now
   What does Jesus mean, however, when he counters Martha’s theological correctness with this statement, “I am the resurrection and the life,” [not, ‘I will be the resurrection and the life.’]. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die,” (John 11:25-26)? And then when he backs this up right then and there by raising Lazarus from the tomb? He does this now, not in some distant future.

4. Mark of Saints: Living Not Just for Future, but in Experienced Anticipation
   What does it mean to live now as those for whom resurrection is a present reality, as well as a future hope? What does mean to live in the paradox of experienced anticipation? It seems that whatever it means, it is a distinguishing mark of Jesus’ disciples. It what distinguishes us as Jesus’ saints.

II. BODY

A. Living in the Now, without Past or Future
   What are the things that make us the people we are?

1. Living in the Present
   We tend to see ourselves as completely self-made people. We have taken charge of our lives and have made ourselves into the unique persons we are. We are independent and self-sufficient. Consequently, when thinking about ourselves we tend to focus solely upon the present.

a. Past and Future Are Irrelevant
   The past is regarded as something either as totally irrelevant, or as something we have resisted and overcome. The past is irrelevant because obviously, they did not solve the problems we now face. If they had solved those problems, we would not currently have them. Even less are we interested in the future.
b. Prisoners of the Present
   What this has done is made us prisoners of the present. Everything must happen now. We must have it now. Problems must be corrected now, on “the first day” (of my presidency). The question we ask, the only questions that have meaning to us is, “Who am I now? How do I feel now about my life?”

2. Ignoring the Fact that We Are Shaped by the Past
   Are we really self-made people? Did we really create this world?

a. Ways in which the Past Shapes Us
   We think of the many ways in which the past shapes us. We think of our genetic make-up. We think of the culture—with its language and traditions and mores and myths—into which we have been socialized. We think of the time-period in which we live, a period that is in transition from Enlightenment thinking to post-modern thinking. We think of the family into which we were born, with its unique history and dynamics. In so many ways, then, we are not self-made, rather, we are also products. So much has already been decided. So much already existed. We have not created the world as much as we have inherited the world.

b. To Understand Ourselves, We Must Understand the Past
   To understand ourselves, then, means to understand our past. It keeps us from assuming that what is now has always existed. It allows us to see other times and people who view life differently than do we.

c. Without the Past, We Look about for Quick Fixes (From Existing Resources)
   When we live without a past and things go badly for the church, all we can do is look around frantically for quick fixes. A quick fix is something that must be created from existing resources. In particular, the church has looked to business to supply these fixes. The past cannot help us—not because the past has nothing to teach us—but because we have already declared the past to be irrelevant to our lives in the present.
d. Challenge of Faith Is to Reclaim the Experiences of God’s Past Saints

We are prisoners of the present, then, when we fail to note the rich history that has preceded us and has shaped the people we now are. That is the challenge for our faith today. It is to acknowledge and claim and strive to understand the experiences the faithful in the past have had with God.

e. The Scriptures

The Scriptures, in particular, must become a focus for us. Without an attempt to look at the Scriptures anew, we deprive ourselves of Jesus. The Scriptures are not simply past, dead, and irrelevant history. The Scriptures have always served as the vehicle in which the living Jesus reaches out in the power of the Holy Spirit to be present to people and to bring about renewal. The saints of the past reveal to us how Jesus is alive and active in the world.

3. Denying the Need for Future, for Hope

There is something else, however, that makes us the people we are. And that is the future.

a. The Importance of Hopes and Dreams

Hopes and dreams have always given people a sense of direction and purpose. Human beings would never say that we wish to be judged solely by what we have done or what we now are. We see ourselves as creatures who envision something more than we now are. It is that image of a new person—an image that awaits us in the future—that pulls us forward and makes us eager for its realization, that makes us willing to undergo the struggles and hardships, that makes us resilient, able get up, time and again, after having fallen.

b. We Have Deprived Ourselves of that Future

And yet, we have deprived ourselves of this most vital human element. We have deprived ourselves of future. We have been told—and we have accepted the notion—that we do not need the future. We do not need hope. And that is because people can deliver life to us right here and right now.
c. We Believe that People Are the Solution; They Can Deliver Now

Part of the reason we are so melancholy—the reason we experience such malaise, the reason we depend so on anti-depressants—is that the future has been denied us. If we do not experience it now, it does not exist nor will it ever exist. Here we are victims of government and advertising who promise that they can deliver all things good into our hands right now. There are two things here: one, the notion that people have the solution, and second, the notion that they can deliver the solution now, in the present, and hence there is no need for future, no need for hope.

Why believe in resurrection when some product can prolong my life, can make me look and feel young now? Why believe in resurrection when we think that we have overcome death?

d. People Cannot Deliver Now New Life

How deadly it is when we buy into all this. No technological advance can overcome of death. No military victory can destroy evil and usher in everlasting peace. No government can create a heaven-on-earth society of equality and prosperity.

e. The Consequence of Living in the Now is Despair

Yet the only thing that awaits me when technology is not able to prolong my life, when I find myself growing and looking and feeling and acting old, is despair. Despair is what we experience when, no matter how many wars we fight and how many “bad” people we kill, there is still evil in the world. Despair is the inevitable result when, no matter how hard we work, we do not get ahead, but a small minority in the country prosper beyond one’s imagining. Despair occurs when we know that something terrible awaits us in the future (for instance, the impact of global warming) and we simply are unable to address it. We go blithely along, assuming that it will never affect us. Despair happens when we come to the realization that nothing new can happen, when we realize that nothing can be new; it will always be the same. Despair happens when we realize that we are trapped in a prolonged present, that there is no future. Despair happens when the people, who told us that they can deliver a better life, let us down and repeat the errors of the past. Depression is life without future. Depression is a shadowy existence. Depression is barely existing.
f. The Church Seeks Quick Fixes (Demands Change from Others, but Not Ourselves)

Consequently, when things start to go badly for the church, we desperately search for quick fixes. In particular, we take comfort in the routines and structures of institutional life. Notice what a quick fix is. It is something that demands change from others, but not from ourselves. It’s up to others to make it all better. You must find the solution, and you must do so now. And when these fixes do not magically appear (because quick fixes are fantasy), we despair. We despair because we have deprived ourselves of hope. We have deprived ourselves of future.

g. Mary and Martha – Jesus Had Failed

We are like the sisters Martha and Mary. Jesus had failed their family. As both Martha and Mary charged, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died,” (John 11:21,32). Or as the “Jews” complained, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?” (John 11:37). Now it is too late. Now the only thing that we know for sure is the reality of death. Despair is Martha protesting Jesus’ order that the stone be removed from the tomb, saying, “Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days,” (John 11:39). We are doomed. There is no future. And even if there is (“I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day,” John 11:24), it is so distant as to be irrelevant to our lives now.

B. Jesus and Experienced Anticipation

1. Jesus Ministry – Completion of Original Creation and Bringing a New Creation

The gospel of John begins with these words, “In the beginning,” (John 1:1). Do those words sound familiar? Of course, it is how the Bible begins, “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth,” (Genesis 1:1). What does it mean when John begins his gospel with just those words? What does it mean when the gospel concludes with Jesus being raised from the grave, having broken the power of evil and death?

Jesus’ ministry is seen as the completion of the original creation, with the resurrection being the start of God’s new creation (N.T. Wright, The Resurrection of the Son of God, page 440).
2. A World in which Death Is Overcome

The story John is telling is about how God—in the person of God’s Word, Jesus—has entered this world, endured the world’s darkness, and has recreated all things. Jesus has brought into being a new creation, a new world: a world in which we are reconciled to God, a world in which death is even now overcome, a world in which the power of God’s Spirit to renew life is experienced. In Jesus we know God present. In Jesus we see the glory of God at work (John 11:4,40). In Jesus the future becomes present. In Jesus we experience here and now eternal life, not a life of simple longevity, but a quality of life, a life of fullness in God’s presence.

3. Promises of Isaiah and Revelation Fulfilled

In Jesus we see the future hope, proclaimed by Isaiah and Revelation, becoming a present reality. Jesus has been making that new creation visible all along, but it is seen particularly in this story. “Lazarus, come out!” (John 11:43). And the unthinkable happened. The future, hoped for resurrection, became reality. “The dead man came out,” (John 11:44).

4. From the Past New Possibility Arises

Notice that this is what Jesus has accomplished in the past. How vital the past is, for from the past act of Jesus, a new possibility for life now arises.

C. Living in Experienced Anticipation

1. Resurrection as Future Hope; and as Having a Present Impact – Breaking Us Out of Our Shell in the Present

The resurrection for us is not just a future hope. While its universal scope is awaited, yet the impact of the resurrection is experienced now by us.

It’s impact is felt as it breaks us free from the shell of the present.

2. Resurrection Allows Us to See the Past with Fresh Eyes

The resurrection awakens us as we see the past anew, with fresh eyes. The death in which we are trapped has, in fact, been broken. Jesus displays God’s glory in raising another, and in himself rising from the tomb. That is a past event. It is an event whose impact is still being felt.
3. Resurrection – Foretaste of Future New Creation
   The resurrection of Jesus is also a foretaste of the new creation that God will make manifest in God’s own time. It is a future event. Yet it is a future event that now is anticipated and whose impact is being felt.

4. In the Holy Spirit, Past and Future Come Together to Change Life Now
   In the Holy Spirit, both God’s past and God’s future come together to change the way we look now at our lives. Something new has occurred. As God said, “See, I am making all things new,” (Revelation 21:5).

5. Set Free from Despair
   This act of God not only breaks open our lives imprisoned in the present, but also breaks the power of despair and depression over us. In the Spirit the past story of Scripture and of the saints of the past can be read anew for the first time. We can see what they tell us of how they remained faithful in the face of similar challenges. In the Spirit we pray that even now we may know the power of Jesus’ resurrection as we are forgiven, as prayers are answered, as God opens up new paths for us.
   The power of death and despair is broken. We live, no longer within its sphere of fear and depression. We see a God who is present with us to make all things new.

III. CONCLUSION

A. Claiming Past and Future
   What made people of the past saints is that they opened themselves up to God’s past action in Christ, and they opened themselves to God’s future that was breaking into their own lives.
   We may be church members, but we are not saints until we break free from the prison of now, the prison of despair and depression. We are saints only as we read anew of God’s work in the past, see the new creation God is bringing into being, and claiming past and future for us now.