On this All Saints Day, we could read many moving and inspiring passages of Scripture. You’ve just heard Jesus’ words of blessing in the beatitudes, which are bracketed by the promise of God’s kingdom and give us the promise that mourners will be comforted. We could have read from John 11, where Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead, saying “I am the resurrection and the life.” We could have read from John 14, where Jesus talks about many rooms in his father’s house and about giving us peace. Or we could have read Paul’s words in Romans 8, where he affirms that neither death nor life nor anything else in all creation can separate us from the love of God.

When thinking about readings for a day like today, Psalm 24 does not immediately come to mind, and yet it is an assigned lectionary reading for All Saints Day. As often happens with scripture, once we scratch beneath the surface a little bit, we find surprising depth and meaning.

Psalm 24 is a celebration of the one who has created the whole world and all the people who live in it. The psalm was used as an entrance liturgy, for those coming to the Temple. And as they came to the Temple, they recognized that God, the King, came to them.

And the words of verse 4 which inspired the title of this sermon evoke what Jesus called the greatest commandment—loving God and loving neighbor.

> The pure heart is how we yearn to stand before God, and not “lifting up our souls to what is false,” as in having no false gods, is about worshipping and loving only the one true God.

> And having clean hands allows us to reach out to neighbors, and not “swearing deceitfully” as in speaking the truth to our neighbors.

Within the psalm, there is movement, from the past, into the present, and then into the future.

Toward the end of the psalm we read “lift up your heads, O gates” which is probably a reference to princes and rulers. In The Message paraphrase of the Bible, Eugene Peterson suggests that we read “lift up your heads, O gates” as

> “Wake up, you sleepyhead city!
Wake up, you sleepyhead people!”

Psalm 24 invites us to wake up, to orient our lives around loving God and neighbor, as we journey forward towards the end of our lives, and beyond, when we enter into God’s presence.

Listen for God’s word:
The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it;
2 for he has founded it on the seas, and established it on the rivers.
3 Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place?
4 Those who have clean hands and pure hearts,
   who do not lift up their souls to what is false,
   and do not swear deceitfully.
5 They will receive blessing from the Lord,
   and vindication from the God of their salvation.
6 Such is the company of those who seek him,
   who seek the face of the God of Jacob.
7 Lift up your heads, O gates! and be lifted up, O ancient doors!
   that the King of glory may come in.
8 Who is the King of glory?
   The Lord, strong and mighty, the Lord, mighty in battle.
9 Lift up your heads, O gates!
   and be lifted up, O ancient doors! that the King of glory may come in.
10 Who is this King of glory?
   The Lord of hosts, he is the King of glory.

Early in life, we learn about death. As children, we usually encounter death
first in nature—a dead bird, or fish, or bug. And we learn more in our childhood
about death in books, movies, and TV.

At some point for all of us, death becomes more real, more personal, more
intimate. I remember as a child when our parents brought me and my brothers to
the funeral home, after the death of an elderly neighbor. I was surprised to see
Mr. Nielson’s body right there in the casket.

And since then, like everyone else, I’ve had other experiences with death.

When a loved one dies, we grieve. We’re sad, we hurt. We cry, we
remember. Our grief comes in a variety of ways, and never fully goes away.
We take comfort in the promise of the gospel, that Jesus came into our world to give abundant and eternal life, and that nothing, not even death can separate us from God’s love.

But something else happens when a loved one dies.

We think about our own life and our own death.

We might deny it or feel guilty for thinking of ourselves as we grieve for others, but it’s only natural. One of the ways we can honor those who have died is by remembering the good in them and by letting that good inspire us to live better lives. In other words, as we celebrate the life of those who have died, we challenge ourselves to live better lives, to more faithfully love God and neighbor.

As Christians, we are called to be people of hope and to live with purpose, even as we deal with our sadness and our grief. In response to God’s great love for us, we are called to live with clean hands and a pure heart.

It’s a sad thing when someone is approaching the end of life and when they are told to “get your affairs in order” they realize how they have lived foolishly, wasting too much time on selfish pursuits, not really caring about the people in their life. Keeping our affairs in order throughout our life is challenging but worthwhile.

Over the past month, I read Charles Dickens’ classic novel *Great Expectations*. The story centers on Pip, an orphan living with his mean hearted sister and her husband, a kindly blacksmith. Pip’s life is changed by an encounter with Magwitch, an escaped convict, Miss Havisham, an eccentric woman, and the beautiful and distant Estella. It’s an engaging story written in the first person from Pip’s adult perspective, giving him the chance to reflect on his life, how at times he was foolish and selfish. A central theme of the book is showing what Pip has learned over the course of his life, about what is really important.
In one powerful scene near the end of the novel, while Pip is trying to make amends for his past foolishness and selfishness, he almost dies in tragic circumstances. As he faces death at the hands of an evil man who threatens to make it look like Pip disappeared without a trace, Pip is fearful about what people will think of him after his death. With the threat of death very real, Pip realizes that the people he cares about won’t know about his efforts to make things right. He seems less concerned about his own death, and more concerned about how he has lived his life and what his legacy will be.

Fortunately Pip doesn’t die in these circumstances and he gets the chance to continue to get things right in his own life, to get his affairs in order, to live with clean hands and a pure heart.

All Saints Day is as good a day as any for us to think about getting our affairs in order.

- To try to heal old wounds and show the people around you that you love them.
- To tell people that they have made a difference in your life, to tell them that because you knew them, you have been changed for good.
- All Saints Day is as good a day as any for you to recognize God’s love for you and God’s presence in your life.

Yesterday morning, I gathered with Marv Schaeffer and his children and grandchildren, as we said goodbye to Jean, his wife of 65 years. Commending her to God, I spoke words from one of my prayer books:

Receive Jean into the arms of your mercy  
Raise her up with all your people  
Receive us also, and raise us into new life  
Help us so to love and serve you in this world  
until we enter into your joy in the world to come.
Jean, and so many others that we remember today, have lived this life wisely and well, inspiring us all to do the same. None of us have perfectly clean hands or totally pure hearts, but thanks to the abundant grace of God, we can live with confidence and hope, encouraging one another along the way.

Let us pray: Dear God, thank you for the gift of this day and the gift of life. As we remember the saints who have gone before us, help us to live our lives wisely and well, as we follow the way of Jesus. Amen.