

Trinity Church in the City of Boston
The Reverend Morgan S. Allen
November 8, 2020
All Faithful Departed

Come Holy Spirit and enkindle in the hearts of your faithful, the fire of your Love. *Amen.*

*... the cries of passion were like
wounds that needed healing –
I couldn't hear them for the thunder.
I was half the naked distance
between hell and heaven's ceiling
and he almost pulled me under.*

*Now someone's on the telephone,
desperate in his pain.
Someone's on the bathroom floor,
doing her cocaine.
Someone's got his finger
on the button in some room.
No one can convince me
we aren't gluttons for our doom.*

*But I've tried
to make this place, my place ...ⁱ*

Raised in her dad's church choir, Emily Saliers and her musical partner, Amy Ray, grew into the rich music scene of Athens, Georgia. Athens would produce international superstars The B-52s and R.E.M.,ⁱⁱ as well as college-radio staples Drivin' N' Cryin',ⁱⁱⁱ and, in time, my favorite band, The Drive-By Truckers. As the acoustic-driven "Indigo Girls," Saliers and Ray have released 15 studio albums and sold more than 5 million records.^{iv} Their best-selling set remains their 1989 eponymous effort, which includes "Prince Of Darkness," the final song in this four-part, four-Sunday sermon series of popular-music illustrations.

Some years back, I swapped iPods with my much-cooler-than-I am drummer-brother-in-law. When asked for his reaction to my catalogue, he replied, "I didn't know there could be that many Indigo Girls songs." Despite my more usual preference for the punk-metal continuum that he and I share, I explained that the Indigo Girls were the inevitable consequence of growing up at a church camp in the 1980s. I have an unapologetic soft spot for the duo, whose harmonies, sincerity, and progressivism have raised me. I loved those albums then, and I love them now.^v

Emily Saliers' father, Dr. Don Saliers, directed the Master of Sacred Music program and taught liturgics and theology at Emory University's Candler School of Theology for more than three decades. In 2006, the father and daughter co-authored *A Song To Sing, A Life To Live*, which, through their respective stories, "explores connections between [the music of Saturday night and Sunday morning] by exploring the spiritual dimensions of music itself."^{vi}

Emily Saliers writes, forthrightly – "I grew up going to church and being raised as a person of faith. I have seen how genuine faith was at the heart of the civil rights movement in America and how faith that works for justice can change the course of history. My faith is deeply personal and not something easily articulated. But faith in the Creator and Sustainer of all things is my reason for being. Music and faith are, for me, intimately related, even as I continue to wrestle with questions about organized religion."^{vii}

In "Prince of Darkness," she sings:

*... There was a time I asked
my father for a dollar
and he gave it a ten dollar raise.
And when I needed my mother
and I called her
she stayed with me for days.*

*Now someone's on the telephone,
desperate in his pain.
Someone's on the bathroom floor,
doing her cocaine.
Someone's got his finger
on the button in some room.
No one can convince me
we aren't gluttons for our doom.*

*But I've tried
to make this place, my place.
I asked for Providence
to smile upon me
with his sweet face ...^{viii}*

Today we at Trinity Church mark the feast of "All Souls," or "All Faithful Departed." While last week's celebration of "All Saints" tends to focus on the renown, those who The Episcopal Church describes as "persons of heroic sanctity, whose deeds were recalled with gratitude by later generations." However, "beginning in the tenth century, it became customary to set aside another day – as a sort of extension of All Saints – on which the Church remembered that vast body of the faithful who, though no less members of the company of the redeemed, are unknown in the wider fellowship of the Church. [This, All Souls Day, is] a day for particular remembrance of family members and friends."^{ix}

In this morning's requiem we share photographs of these loved ones, along with the names from that impossibly long list of more than 230,000 fellow Americans who have died from COVID-19 ... part of the more than 1.25 million who have died worldwide this long year.

Despite the grief we feel – at times dark, at times overwhelming – As Christians, our remembrance of the dead *always aims us toward life*. The Episcopal Catechism reminds us that “We [continue praying for the dead], because we still hold them in our love ... Our assurance is that nothing, not even death, shall separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”^x And our leaning into the love we have for one who has died, draws us – *inevitably* – into *God's great Love*, into the Love with which we were created and share our being ... the Love by which we remain bound to our beloved, even across the threshold of death.

Saliers continues:

*... the cries of passion were like
wounds that needed healing –
I couldn't hear them for the thunder.
I was half the naked distance
between hell and heaven's ceiling
and he almost pulled me under ...*

*... But I tried to make this place, my place
I asked for Providence to smile upon me
with his sweet face.*

*... My place is of the sun,
and this place is of the dark ...*

*... By grace, my sight grows stronger,
and I will not be a pawn
for the Prince of Darkness any longer ...^{xi}*

In a 2006 interview with former disc-jockey Carl Wiser, Saliers recalls: “Prince of Darkness” was “written a long, long time ago. Sometimes when I think about that song, it feels pretty adolescent to me. Some of the images are overwrought. But it's [a] testament to my parents, and to their love. Which I know is kind of a rare thing in this world, because I know that a lot of people really struggle with their parents. But it was always my own constant battle with my inner darkness, and the prince of darkness, [that] diabolical force. So [the song] is about light and darkness[, a]nd how darkness you can feel sometimes like it almost is going to pull you under. But there are people in your life who can save you. And not just my parents, but friends or support systems ... [I]n the end, it's an affirmative statement[, despite its foreboding title:] *I'm not going to be a pawn for the prince of darkness* ... I have the strength to find my light, rather than to dwell in my darkness.”^{xii}

See, all of us are – *always* – “half the naked distance between hell and heaven’s ceiling.” Whether pandemic, or politics, or pathos, we feel those tugs of darkness pulling us down, and so, too, those outreaches of light, lifting us up. Caught between, we must, at some point, choose to which we will give the power of our life. Empowering our anger and our fears ... our grief and our disappointments ... our regret and our indignations ... can feel deceptively righteous, but be sure that feeding those roils and binding ourselves to one another by commiseration makes us nothing more than “pawns of the Prince of Darkness ... gluttons for our doom.”

As an antidote, our All Souls remembrances *hold us in the light*. Today, we “make this place, [our] place,” bearing into it the light with which and for which we were made. We pray that “by grace, [our] sight [would grow] stronger,” and, today we give ourselves to *the Good*: to God’s hope and love, to Providence’s smile and peace, to the Lord’s justice and mercy.

We offer these devotions for ourselves *and on behalf of others*. Indeed, “marshalling the forces of decency”^{xiii} ... marshalling the forces of fairness, goodwill, and the common good, we seek to support one another, with kindness and generosity, with compassion and cooperation. Daring trust and practicing trustworthiness, we nurture the “strength to find our light, rather than [only to] dwell in our darkness.”

Trinity Church, join in this Communion with *all* our beloved: those saints and souls who are near, and those “we love, but see no longer.”^{xiv} And may all that we do on this All Souls Day inaugurate Isaiah’s vision:

And God will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; God will swallow up death forever. Then the Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of the people God will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken. It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for this Holy One, so that this Lord might save us. This is the God for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in our salvation.^{xv}

“With angels,
and archangels,
and all the company of heaven,” I pray;^{xvi}
Amen.

ⁱ Indigo Girls. “[Prince of Darkness](#),” *Indigo Girls*. Epic Records, 1989. There are many versions of this song online (including the studio version), but I found this live one – from the year of its release – especially fun.

ⁱⁱ R.E.M. lead singer, Michael Stipe, memorably sings backup on “Kid Fears,” the song just before “Prince of Darkness” on the eponymous album.

ⁱⁱⁱ I heard Drivin’ N’ Cryin’s *Mystery Road* in my cousin’s car on Thanksgiving Day of 1989. In the year that followed, I listened to that album 1,000 times, if I listened to it once.

^{iv} I think the number is a lot higher than this, but I based the five-million minimum on their known “Platinum” records (which mark one-million copies sold).

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- ^v I have a strong aversion to artists who present earnestness as a kind of schmaltzy veneer ... *strong* aversion.
- ^{vi} Saliers, Don and Emily Saliers. *A Song To Sing, A Life To Live*. Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2019. I drew this quote from the more recent edition of the book, which (as noted in the sermon) was first published in 2006.
- ^{vii} Ibid.
- ^{viii} “Prince of Darkness.”
- ^{ix} From the entry for “All Faithful Departed” in *Lesser Feasts and Fasts* (1994), p. 412.
- ^x From the entry for “The Christian Hope” in *The Book of Common Prayer*, p. 862.
- ^{xi} “Prince of Darkness.”
- ^{xii} Wisner, Carl. “[Emily Saliers of Indigo Girls](#),” songfacts.com, December 7, 2006.
- ^{xiii} From President-Elect Joseph R. Biden’s acceptance speech on November 7, 2020. I did not cite the reference in the preached sermon, trusting the congregation’s ear to make the connection. The fuller context of Mr. Biden’s words: “What is our mandate? I believe it is this: Americans have called on us to marshal the forces of decency and the forces of fairness. The forces of science and the forces of hope in the great battles of our time.” Mr. President, that will preach.
- ^{xiv} From “The Burial of the Dead, Rite II,” in *The Book of Common Prayer*, p. 498.
- ^{xv} Isaiah 25:6-9.
- ^{xvi} Those familiar bars from the Eucharistic Prayers in *The Book of Common Prayer* (and elsewhere): “... Therefore we praise you, joining our voices with Angels and Archangels and with all the company of heaven, who for ever sing this hymn to proclaim the glory of your Name ...”