

On the Right Road

On this All Saints Day when we are reminded of the saints who have gone before, we encounter texts that blur the line between past, present, and future by encouraging us to travel the long trodden road toward God's love, justice, and liberation.

Focus scripture: Matthew 5:1–12

Those who follow Jesus up the mountain, both disciples and the crowd, can hardly be faulted for being reminded of Moses who helped shape a motley crew of wandering ex-slaves into a community of liberation. Biblical scholars point out the many ways the gospel of Matthew helps make the connection between Jesus and Moses. It is on this mountain that Jesus offers an inaugural sermon akin to Jesus' inaugural message at Nazareth, which is recorded in the gospel of Luke. In both Nazareth and on the mountain, Jesus sets forth the identity, purpose, and direction of his ministry.

The crowd, hanging further back, are keenly aware of the poverty and injustices they face at the hands of imperial Rome. Can this Jesus make any difference in their lives and world? The disciples have already thrown their lot in with Jesus, but their understanding of what Jesus is calling them to be and do is still in the formative stage. As a prophet and leader of the divinely inspired liberation movement to which Moses earlier gave leadership, Jesus knows what is at stake.

By his very life, Jesus represents for the people the character of God who calls them into a liberated and justice-oriented way of living that is in direct opposition to the controlling, oppressive way of living established by Rome. Jesus invites and encourages them to be citizens of this new way of being, which he calls the kingdom of God.

The blessings that follow only make sense for a people who recognize the threat of domination systems because they live it. Each blessing is designed to support, encourage, and nurture a way of life that is counter to the exploitation and oppression they are familiar with. In his commentary in *Feasting on the Word*, Patrick Gray tells us that the word blessing translated from the Hebrew *ashar* is best translated "you are on the right road." In other words, Jesus says, "You are on the right road when you are in poor in spirit...when you mourn...when you are meek...when you

hunger and thirst for righteousness."

Being on the right road and blessing are synonymous. There is no contradiction between mourning and blessing if you are on the road toward God's realm of liberation and justice. Each of the blessings takes on new and vital meaning because they are no longer about an unrealizable aspiration. On the contrary, they are about the energy, spirit, and power given to everyone in the present who is on this road. For those who are on the right road, there also exists a new experience of time, one in which those who have died or gone before share in the present, offering support and encouragement. Something we might expect from all the saints.

Revelation 7:9–1 confronts imperial Rome and systems of domination with vivid and dramatic eschatological language, picturing a future in which the blessings have come into fullness. Differences of language, culture, or any other means of human separation create no barriers for inclusion in this place of justice, compassion, and healing. Revelation calls upon the churches to become witnesses to this ultimate promise.

The writer of **Psalm 34:1–10, 22** refuses to let troubles of any sort keep one from living in the blessing and presence of God. In all situations, one can magnify the glory of God because it is never about momentary loss, but rather living in relationship with this God of liberation, justice, and mercy.

1 John 3:1–3 returns to the theme of identity and purpose. Core to that identity is the basic premise of knowing you are loved. It is this love that purifies us for living as citizens of God's realm.

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In this week's readings, there is no disconnect between hard times and God's love. Just the opposite, love can lead us into the struggle of a new way of living, a new world. The blessing comes in knowing this road, this path, however challenging, is one that leads to life?



Focus scripture

Matthew 5:1–12

Additional scriptures

Revelation 7:9–1

Psalm 34:1–10

1 John 3:1–3

 *Seasons of the Spirit* is based on semi-continuous readings of the Revised Common Lectionary.

Blessed One, you never cease to surprise us. We grow accustomed to a way of accounting for our lives that often puts us in the losing column. Help us claim the identity and direction you offer to us so that we may stay on the road to your freedom, justice, mercy, and compassion. Amen.

Lection Connection

links current events with this week's scriptures. Go to www.seasonsonline.ca and click on the link.

The Focus for Ages 6–8

Children aged six to eight years will have experienced blessings many times in their lives, and at this age they are usually more open to a wide definition of what a blessing is than are many adults. Security in being welcomed into a group activity, joy in caring for a younger child, affirmation from a beloved adult, or excitement at a new learning opportunity – all these and much more are blessings to children this age. Seven-year-old Maia, for example, thought it a gift straight from God when she found an infestation of toads in the basement of her house; her mother couldn't quite see the blessing on her own, but Maia helped her. Many children are also aware that they themselves are a source of blessing to others. Particularly if they live in openly affectionate, affirming homes, most children will have seen someone's face light up when they enter a room, or heard joy in

another's voice when they say the child's name.

The question of saintly behaviour is a source of confusion for some younger children. While they want to "be good" and are aware of what being "good" might mean at home, school, or church, they are aware that maintaining a record of perfect behaviour is impossible for them. Fortunately, it is also impossible for the rest of us, and we can do much to model how healthy adults cope when their own haloes slip. At least two things are important on this All Saints Day: acknowledgment of "saintly" lives lived in the pursuit of God's way of love, and recognition that this kind of "saintly" behaviour is an option for all of us. Pray that children everywhere may experience the reality of Jesus' assurance to the children: "You will know God's blessing."

Prepare

Before the session

- ❑ Read and prayerfully reflect on this week's focus scripture, Matthew 5:1–12, and [biblical background](#) material (p. 51).
- ❑ Set a worship space with white cloth, white pillar candle, offering basket, and Bible with bookmark in focus passage.
- ❑ Bring [basic supply kit](#) (p. 2) and, if possible, *Seasons Songbook* (Volume 3), *Seasons Music CD* (Volume 3), and CD or MP3 player; downloadable sheet music and MP3 recordings are available at www.seasonsonline.ca.

Gather

- ❑ Bring, if possible, the song "Come into God's Presence" (p. 9 in *Seasons Songbook*, Vol. 3; #2 on *Seasons Music CD*, Vol. 3).
- ❑ Bring several gold or yellow paper strips approximately 5 x 20 cm/2 x 8in for each child, glitter, and a stapler

Engage

- ❑ Bring today's resource sheet "[You Are Blessed](#)," a small bell, and a stick.

Respond

Choose from the options provided. Prepare and bring the necessary materials.

- ❑ **Making peace:** copies of today's resource sheet "[Blessed Peacemakers](#)"
- ❑ **Saint surprises:** white construction paper, white tissue paper, white narrow ribbon, and envelopes. Locate the church pictorial directory.
- ❑ **Display board:** drawing paper. Find a bulletin board in a hallway or open area where children's pictures can be displayed and others will see them.

Bless

- ❑ Bring, if possible, song "Live in the Spirit of Love" (p. 22 in *Seasons Songbook*, Vol. 3; #31 on *Seasons Music CD*, Vol. 3).



On the Right Road

Scripture

Matthew 5:1–12

FOCUS To know that we are blessed to be a blessing

Gather

Welcome the children. Introduce any newcomers to the group and share experiences from the past week.

Opening ritual

Gather around the worship space. Point out the white cloth. Explain that today we celebrate All Saints Day, a time to remember all the people in the past and present who love God and are followers of Jesus.

Pray Lead the group in a prayer, inviting the children to respond with the bolded phrase.

Thank you, God, for this time to learn and grow together.

Thank you, God! (*Clap once on each syllable.*)
(*Invite a child to hold up the Bible.*)

Thank you for the stories in the Bible.

Thank you, God! (*Clap once on each syllable.*)
(*Invite a child to light the candle.*)

Thank you that you are always with us.

Amen. (*Clap twice, once on each syllable.*)

Sing Lead the children in singing, if possible, the song “Come into God’s Presence” (p. 9 in *Seasons Songbook*, Vol. 3; #2 on *Seasons Music CD*, Vol. 3).

Receive the offering. Extinguish the candle to signal that the opening ritual has ended.

Connecting life and theme

On All Saints Day, we honour all the people who are living and all those who have died who followed Jesus’ teachings and lived in God’s way. Invite children to name those who have shared God’s love with them, and remind them that they are saints too. Invite children to make a garland of haloes as a way of naming some saints. Distribute gold or yellow strips and invite children to print one name on each strip, adding the word “Saint” (such as people they know who show God’s love, biblical or historical characters). Make sure every child writes his or her own name on a strip. Connect all the strips together with a stapler to make a paper chain garland and hang in the worship area.

Engage

Before the story

Invite a child to bring the Bible from the worship table and use the bookmark to open it to **Matthew 5**. In today’s Bible story we hear about a time when Jesus was teaching people about what it means to share God’s love. In Jesus’ teaching we hear the word “blessing.” Talk about the word “blessing” and ask the children if they know what it means. When we receive something loving from someone, it’s called a blessing. When people do loving things for us, we feel blessed. Take two more paper strips and print, “Blessed to be a blessing” on them. Begin and end the garland made earlier with these strips.

Bible story

Use resource sheet “[You Are Blessed](#)” to tell the story. Have the bell and stick to ring it nearby.

After the story

Sing “We Are Blessed” (*tune: “If You’re Happy and You Know It”*).

Children shake hands or make high fives with a partner as they sing each line of the following song. Pause and ask, “How can we pass on God’s blessing?” Together think of one way and then repeat song, finding a new partner each time.

We are blessed. Jesus tells us, pass it on.

We are blessed. Jesus tells us, pass it on.

We are blessed and we know it,

And we really want to show it.

We are blessed. Jesus tells us, pass it on.

Respond

Choose from the following activities:

- **Making peace** When we work for peace in the world, we are living in God's way. Hand out the resource sheet "Blessed Peacemakers" and invite children to draw or print ways we can live peacefully and help others to do the same. Encourage them to try one peacemaking idea during the coming week. 
- **Saint surprises** All Saints Day is a good opportunity to recognize the saints in your congregation by sending them greeting cards. Together look through the church directory and encourage the children each to choose a person. Make cards by folding in half a sheet of construction paper. Glue a smaller white rectangle of tissue paper on the front. Then form a cross with white ribbon and glue on top of the tissue paper. Print a message inside such as "God loves you. You're a saint!" Help the children address the envelopes for the saints they chose and arrange to deliver them or mail them.
- **Display board** Jesus told the people to rejoice because they were part of a great community of others who came before them who lived in God's way of love (verse 12), the community of saints that we celebrate today. Distribute drawing paper and invite children to draw pictures of a community of saints. Who would be there? What would they be doing to show God's love? Create a collage of these drawings by gluing them onto a sheet of poster board. Add a title such as "A Community of Saints," and display somewhere visible in the church.

Bless

Gather around the worship area and light the candle again.

Sing if possible, the song "Live in the Spirit of Love" (p. 22 in *Seasons Songbook*, Vol. 3; #31 on *Seasons Music CD*, Vol. 3).

Pray Lead the children in the following prayer, inviting them to repeat each line after you.

Dear God,
help us, your saints,
to be a blessing in the world.
Amen.

Send each child out with these words, "(Child's name), God blesses you, and you are a blessing to others."

Reflect

Where did you and the children see signs of God's blessing during today's session? Were there any children who struggled to see themselves as blessings? In what ways did children show they are beginning to realize they are saints of God?



You Are Blessed

(based on Matthew 5:1–9, 12)

Story Tip

Refrain from interpreting the story. Children can leave a story and come back later to it without losing the continuity of the story. They simply fill in the spaces with their imaginations.

(Practice the refrain, "God blesses you." Each time you ring a little bell, that is the children's signal to repeat the phrase.)

People. People. People. Everywhere you looked you could see people. There were mothers and fathers. There were children and babies. There were grandparents and uncles and aunts. There were sad people and hurting people. There were happy people and loving people. Everyone was there. Everyone had come to see Jesus.

Jesus looked around at the people's faces. *(Pause.)* Jesus saw many people who were just beginning to learn about God's way of love, and many people who wanted to know even more about how to live in ways that pleased God. Jesus turned to the disciples and said,

Look at the people who know how much they still have to learn about God.

When you are ready for God's way of looking at things, you will know God's blessing. *(Tap bell.)*

Children: God blesses you.

God wants you to show you everything about a world filled with God's love.

Look at the people who are grieving about all they've lost.

When you are sad, you will know God's blessing. *(Tap bell.)*

Children: God blesses you.

God wants you to be comforted by God's love.

Look at the people who are quietly listening for a message from God.

When you let God lead, you will know God's blessing. *(Tap bell.)*

Children: God blesses you.

God wants you to have everything in the world that can't be bought.

Look at the people who are trying hard to live in God's way.

When you are hungry and thirsty for a world filled with God's love, you will know God's blessing. *(Tap bell.)*

Children: God blesses you.

God wants you to be filled up completely with God's love.

Look at the people who show love and compassion to others.

When you are caring, you will know God's blessing. *(Tap bell.)*

Children: God blesses you.

God wants everyone to feel more of God's love by sharing it with others.

Look at the people who are focused on God.

When you are living in God's way, you will know God's blessing. *(Tap bell.)*

Children: God blesses you.

God wants everyone to feel God's love deep inside and all around.

Look at the people who are helping others to get along with each other.

When you are cooperating together, you will know God's blessing. *(Tap bell.)*

Children: God blesses you.

God wants everyone to live together peacefully.

When you do all these things as you're learning to live in God's way of love, you can be very happy. You are pleasing God, just as all of the prophets and witnesses who lived before you pleased God.

The disciples thought about what Jesus said, and they looked around at the people who had come to hear Jesus teach. They began to see what Jesus meant. They began to see how God wanted them to live. And they wanted to learn even more.



Blessed Peacemakers

Peacemaking is...	Peacemaking is not...
cooperating everyone wins sharing taking turns talking it out	arguing somebody loses keeping everything for yourself always being first fighting

When we work for peace in the world, we are living in God's way.

Draw or print two ways you might live peacefully.

Draw or print two ways you might bless others by helping them to live peacefully.

Is there one way you could try this week?

We are
peacemakers
when we...

