

Bring Your Grief to the Table & Find Hope for your Soul

All Saints Sunday B

Nov. 6/7, 2021

Rev. Dr. David Gardner Tweed

First Reading: Isaiah 25:6-9 *Isaiah sees a vision of the end of days, when God will gather all people on God's holy mountain & will prepare for them a rich feast. At this banquet God will wipe the tears from all eyes & there will be no more sorrow, for God will destroy death itself.*

⁶On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear. ⁷& the Lord will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; ⁸the Lord will swallow up death forever. Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces, & the disgrace of the chosen people God will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken. ⁹It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God, for whom we have waited, so that God might save us. This is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us be glad & rejoice in the salvation of the Lord.

Gospel: John 11:32-44 *Through the raising of Lazarus, Jesus offers the world a vision of the life to come, when death & weeping will be no more.*

³²When Mary came where Jesus was & saw him, she knelt at his feet & said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." ³³When Jesus saw her weeping, & the Judeans who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit & deeply moved. ³⁴He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come & see." ³⁵Jesus began to weep. ³⁶So the Judeans said, "See how he loved him!" ³⁷But some of them said, "Could not the one who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" ³⁸Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, & a stone was lying against it. ³⁹Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." ⁴⁰Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" ⁴¹ So they took away the stone. & Jesus looked upward & said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. ⁴²I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me." ⁴³When Jesus had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" ⁴⁴The dead man came out, his hands & feet bound with

strips of cloth, & his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, & let him go.”

Introduction

Of all 3 years of the lectionary cycle, this year’s All Saints readings have the most tears. Isaiah & Revelation look forward to the day when God will wipe away all tears; in John’s gospel, Jesus weeps along with Mary & all the gathered mourners before he demonstrates his power over death. On All Saints Day we celebrate the victory won for all the faithful dead, but we grieve for our beloved dead as well, knowing that God honors our tears. We bring our grief to the table & find there a foretaste of Isaiah’s feast to come.

Overview Unbinding the Living

On All Saints Sunday we remember loved ones who have been laid in the tomb. We know the acute grief of Mary, Martha, & Jesus. We know the reality of death that lies so close. We know that at any moment the phone call could come with news we dread. We live forever in the shadow of death. At the same time, we also know the little deaths that take place every day. We know the daily disappointments, the betrayal of a friend, a failure at work, a difficult & tumultuous marriage, the loneliness & pain of one longing for something more from life. Beyond that there are the near-constant reminders that much of this world is far from God’s kingdom. How easy it is to look & see poverty & injustice, disease & despair all around. Like Lazarus, we are bound tightly in death’s clothes: grief, disappointment, hopelessness. Yet Jesus speaks the last word for us: “Unbind him, & let him go”. This promise is bursting with resurrecting life. This word is spoken by the one who became human & was put in a tomb, but broke through the pervasive stench of death. In the waters of the font, we hear God speak this word to us. Lifting us out of the waters, God frees us from the binding rags of death & dresses us in the royal clothing of Christ. At the table, we feast with the God in whom we have waited, the God who swallows up death forever. The last word is not death, but life as a beloved child of God. Clothed in the righteousness of Christ, God’s people are called forth from the grave. Fellow saints rush forward to remove the rotting grave clothes. Together the people of God celebrate the hope & promise of resurrection, rising each new day to joyfully serve in the name of the one who is beyond death, Jesus our Savior.

Ideas - Book

In Elaine Pagels's memoir *Why Religion? A Personal Story* (New York: HarperCollins, 2018), she writes of how her life & career were shaped by the deaths of a high school friend &, later, her young son & her husband within a single horrifying year. She was enraged & haunted by the words of friends, clergy, & others who attempted to comfort her with facile platitudes. Resist the temptation to rush to the hope of the resurrection; hold space for people to name their grief. Although the readings from Isaiah & Revelation prophesy a time when death will be no more, that time has not yet come. Death hurts. Jesus cried at Lazarus's death. Knowing the power of the resurrection does not negate the pain. Bring tissues. Acknowledge the pain & share the stories. The church can be a place of healing if we have courage to hold space where people can bring raw grief.

Service Element

The millions of lives that were lost to the coronavirus must be acknowledged & mourned—on the global scale as well as the personal. Additionally, many deaths from other causes over the past two years were not properly grieved due to the moratoriums on travel & large gatherings. We need to continue to find ways to address the tremendous backlog of grief in our communities.

E-formation

God has made into saints all who have been baptized into Christ, & we honor especially those who have died in the faith by referring to them as saints of God. Our assembly joins with countless other Christians to praise God for the life of all the saints.

All Saints Day

The custom of commemorating on a single day all the saints of the church, especially the many unknown martyrs, originated in the 4th century. By the 8th century, the festival commemorating all saints had been moved in England & Ireland to Nov 1 in order to Christianize the Celtic harvest festival of Samhain, which marked the beginning of winter & communal attention to the dead. In current Christian use, the day is dedicated to thanksgiving for all the unnamed who have died in the Lord. In many assemblies, the names of those who have died over the previous twelve months are read aloud, a

practice originally associated with All Souls Day on Nov 2. The conflation of the two emphases fits with the Protestant belief that all the Christian dead are saints & none needs release from purgatory.

Isaiah 25:6-9

From 1st Isaiah in the 8th century bce comes one of the Bible's loveliest descriptions of the full & final messianic banquet. The sacred mountain no longer inspires terror, but welcomes all peoples to a feast. Verses 8-9 exemplify the Bible's eschatological vision: in the end, disgrace will be erased & death will be defeated, for God will save the world. Eschatological hopes especially mark a people who see no way out of their current dilemma.

The Isaiah passage is chosen for today because its poetry provides another genre to parallel the narrative of the raising of Lazarus: the very shroud of Lazarus is cast off, & also Christ's tears are wiped away. At holy communion today, we join one another in God's feast for all the world.

John 11:32-44

In the last of the seven signs presented by the fourth evangelist in the late first century as demonstrations of Jesus' divinity, the long narrative of the raising of Lazarus includes Jesus' sorrow over the death of his friend. The miracle is a sign from God that Jesus is sent by God to show God's glory & to give life, which in John is seen most fully on the cross. The man laid in a cave with a stone at its entrance prefigures Christ's resurrection. The resuscitation of Lazarus is a symbol of the resurrection at the end of time. The word of Jesus is seen as powerful over death. Through the story of the raising of Lazarus, we experience Jesus accompanying us in our sorrow, & we believe that in Christ the power of death will be defeated. The synoptic gospels tell of two other resuscitation stories—the daughter of Jairus & the widow's only son—but true to form, John's story is most detailed as a proclamation of the power of Christ over death. Christians can trust that the mercy of God will prevail over their own death & that of those they love.

Principles from the commemoration of All Saints

- We are Saints because of what God has done for us, not what we do.

- Grief is real for ALL times when we experience loss; becomes complicated when various symptoms persist and/or worsen
 - See www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/complicated-grief/symptoms-causes/syc-20360374 for more info.
- Grief is to be felt, experienced, perhaps shared as part of the human condition.
- Grief like all emotions is best to be ‘worked’ through – digested like food for the body, though it is a full plate for the soul, mind, and the experience of reality in all its forms.

“Working” through intense emotional experiences (Grief in this example) includes:

- **Admitting** the reality of what has occurred,
- **Allowing** yourself to feel the impact in whatever way that wells up inside of you,
- **Acknowledging** in words/thoughts/actions that the experience has taken place (this moves it from the inside world to the outside reality), being open to the connection with others as they share this experience too (listening to their stories/pain/numbness, etc),
- **Appreciating** (in thought, word, deed) the value/worth/significance of what has occurred,
- **Attending** (reflecting/thinking about) on what the experience means to you personally, relationally, emotionally, etc.,
- **Ascribing** to the future the difference the relationship with this person had and will continue to have in who you are.
- **Attaching** again to life’s relationships, activities, routine, etc.
- **Acquiring** again a purpose to get up in the morning and move through your days.
- **Advancing in life:** trusting in God’s promises of Resurrection and the Community of Saints; leaning in to the continuing gift of life God has provided for you & being reassured of the goodness of the one who died and the impact of their life on yours.