

## **All Saints Sunday November 7, 2021**

### **Isaiah 25:6-9; John 11:32-44**

On this All Saints Sunday, our Gospel text from John confronts us with the ugly reality of death. Martha, the sister of Lazarus, telling Jesus to not open the tomb, because “There is a stench, because he has been dead four days.” A literal reminder that death stinks, it consumes.

The image of death as a great devourer is one that is present in many ancient cultures. In those cultures, more so even than any rival or foreign power, death is often the greatest enemy. It is this image of death that Isaiah seems to be pointing to. Death as the one thing we all share and by whom we will all be consumed.

It is not something we often talk about in plain language as human beings, especially here in the West where we have distanced ourselves from the literal stink of death. It used to be much closer, when the bodies of loved ones were washed by us, when they were laid out in the parlor and placed into graves dug by our own hands. But now, we keep it at a distance, try to cover up the ugliness. Turn it into something sad but rather benign. Seeking to deny or hide from it.

Yet, we cannot hide. In the past twenty months, and especially this calendar year, Death has stalked us all in a more visible way than most of us have ever experienced in our lives.

Just over 5 million people have died from COVID-19 across the globe (and that is most certainly an undercount). Just a little less than the population of Wisconsin.

754,000 American citizens, three quarters of a million people, have died in the last 20 months from Covid and counting. That's like losing the population of North Dakota, or the city of Seattle. For comparison, the 1918-19 flu pandemic had 675,000 deaths in a similar timeframe. Death grew so much in the US our life expectancy went down by just over 1.5 years in 2020 and with more COVID deaths this year than last, thanks to the Delta variant, it will probably drop again.

All this on top of the usual but equally jarring deaths from cancer, heart disease, accidents, violence done to ourselves or others, and bodies wearing out from age or abuse. Death, devouring us in other forms.

And for most of last year and a good part of this year we could not mourn as we have been used to. Because of the nature of this pandemic, we could not gather in assembly to comfort those who mourn without death also possibly being a visitor. We could not gather to sit with them in their grief, but also remind them and ourselves that their relationship with their loved one is not ended but changed. That they continue to be a real and vital part of the assembly of believers.

I have tried to do that on your behalf these past 20 months at the nine funerals and committals I have presided at. But I am so aware of the essential things that have been missing. And that was you. The assembly of believers. A visible sign of the church.

Death has stalked us these past 20 months and it has not been pretty. We have seen the trucks brought in to provide relief for overcrowded morgues. We have seen the ugliness of death from COVID in documentaries, read the testimony of public health officials. We have heard the cries of medical staff from

overwhelmed clinics and hospitals as they describe the feelings of sadness and futility as they have seen patient after patient die.

And yet, we continue to have this desire to look past death or at least ignore it, especially when it is not personal to us and sometimes even then. This is because it rips away all illusion and places us in the unwelcome position of being made aware again that we are not ultimately in control. That we are not masters of our fate. That death awaits us all. And it rankles us. It terrifies us. So, we blame and bluster. It's the fault of doctors and nurses, or this thing or that person. But when all is said and done- our loved one is still dead. And death seems to win. It always seems to win.

But there stands Jesus. Jesus, to whom we cry with Mary, "If you had been here my brother/my sister/my wife/my friend would not have died!"

Jesus, who hears our cry, just as he heard Mary and Martha's pleas. Jesus, who comes to their side. Jesus, who weeps, we do not know why for certain, but I wonder if it is not because he loves with the same passion his Father shows in sending him to the world. For John 3 reminds us that God sent Jesus because of God's love for the world not to condemn it but save it. In my mind, Jesus is doing the same thing God does in Exodus when God tells Moses, "I have seen the misery of my people... I have heard their cry...I know their sufferings... I have come down to deliver them." (Exodus 3:7-8).

Jesus comes to us, just as he did to Mary and Martha. He comes in the midst of the community as it mourns and joins them in their mourning. But he doesn't leave it there. Death has pissed him off. He is greatly disturbed, the word describes the angry snort of a horse, and he goes to the tomb- sealed with

Lazarus inside. A visible sign of the seeming victory of death. Using the same language as resurrection, Jesus tells them to raise up the stone covering the tomb. Then he cries out with a loud voice, he calls Lazarus by name, and commands him, "Come outside!" And still bound by the grave clothes he comes out! "Unbind him" Jesus tells the assembly, "let him go."

The imagery is deliberately reminiscent of what will be happening to Jesus soon, a stone rolled away from the tomb, a body called out by the voice of God. A claiming of life from that seemingly implacable foe death.

But this is the good news! That when we proclaim the mystery of faith- Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again! We proclaim that if Jesus can raise Lazarus, he can raise me too. He can raise my brother/my sister/my wife/my friend! When we trust in this good news, even as Mary and Martha did- as full of questions as they were- when we trust this good news then we can proclaim with Paul in 1 Corinthians 15, "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" For, as Isaiah describes in our Hebrew Scripture this morning, our God- the one who loves the world enough to send Jesus, God's own Son into it- our God will destroy the shroud of death that covers all nations. Our God will destroy the mourning veil spread over all. Our God will swallow up death forever.

The good news is that death does not win in the end.

But as we sit here in the already, but not yet. As we live in that time before the resurrection of the dead. It still hurts. But our faith and trust in Jesus- who was raised from the dead by God the Father and who raises Lazarus- means that we can see this moment for what it is. That the feelings of abandonment and despair that death brings are an illusion. For death does not sever the ties that bind us to

the dead. Instead, we see in Christ that love never ends. We see in our faith the reality that we our relationship with them is not over but transformed.

And we enact this truth in our funeral liturgy. I have talked before about how I miss the symbolism of this truth in older country churches. If you have been to any of them, what is behind the front wall? Yep, it's the cemetery. And that is deliberate. Because it means that the table is not in front of the worshippers but in the center of them. That even those who have died in the faith are still a vital part of the assembly of believers that is the church.

How else do we see this in a funeral? We don't do it here, but the tradition is that if the casket is left in the aisle for the service, which way do their feet face? Forward, so that if that great getting up day were to happen at this moment and they were to sit up, what orientation would they be in? They would be facing the table just like the rest of us. That they continue to be a part of the assembly of believers.

This is also what we mean by the communion of the saints, that when we receive the Meal we eat not only with those physically around us, not only with those in the world eating the Meal, but also with all those who have received the Meal all the way down to Jesus and the disciples and all the way forward to our grandchildren and great grandchildren and beyond. So, when I eat, I eat with Beatrice, my Nana and with Raymond, my grandpa. I eat with Erik, my son and with Joel, my colleague.

This belief that our loved ones in the faith are still with us is not some platitude flung into the night and then gone. It is not some idea meant to calm the grief for the living. A pious wish. It is truth. Truth found in words proclaimed and heard.

Truth in tears seen and grief observed by the one who is the creator of all that exists. God, Abba, Father to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Perhaps the best illustration of this new relationship comes from the movie *Places in the Heart*. If you have not watched it, it is set in 1935 Texas and follows Edna Spaulding as she tries to keep her family together after her husband, the sheriff, is accidentally shot and killed by a young black man. That same young man is killed by the local KKK. As Edna tries to plant and harvest a crop of cotton to sell to keep her house, she is aided by an older black man who leaves before the end of the film after he is attacked and they are all threatened by the Klan. Edna's sister has her husband run off with another woman. And Edna is constantly at odds with the local banker about selling the farm. At the end of the film, the last scene is in the church where the pastor reads 1 Corinthians 13, "If you have not love" and then we see the assembly passing communion among themselves in the pews. And here we see characters alive and dead, black and white, antagonist and protagonist, seated together and sharing the Meal. A visible representation of the communion of the saints, of the forgiveness in the Meal as the sheriff and the young man who killed him both share the Meal with one another, of the reality that we all need God's grace and mercy that comes to us in the Meal but also through the assembly of all the believers- living and dead- that is the church.

This is the reality that we remember today. That death is real and ugly and it hurts. But also that it does not win. For God in Jesus Christ has swallowed up death and we will be reunited with our loved ones on that great getting' up day that we'll sing about in our closing hymn. And so we remember today, those who have died in the faith in the past year.