

“Wiping Away Tears”
Isaiah 25:6-9; Psalm 24; John 11:32-44; Revelation 21:1-6a
Salem United Methodist Church; November 4, 2018
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All Saints Day is a tradition in which the church remembers those of the faith who are receiving their heavenly reward. November 1 is the actual date of All Soul’s Day or All Hallow’s Day, but we celebrate All Saints Day on the first Sunday in November. The Christian celebration of All Saints’ Day stems from a belief that there is a powerful spiritual bond between those in heaven, the Church Triumphant, and those of us still living on earth. As United Methodists we do not exonerate certain faithful individuals into sainthood, but view all the faithful as part of the “Great Cloud of Witnesses” (Hebrews 12) or as part of the Communion of Saints as stated in the Apostles Creed. Today we remember this spiritual bond between the past and the present with all those who are famous and those who are not.

Almost everyone in this room has lost someone they loved: parents, spouses, siblings, grandparents, children, close friends, and those who mentored us in the faith. We know grief. We know the feeling of emptiness and numbness when we face the gut wrenching reality that the one we love is gone from our sight and touch. We know the feeling of having a piece of our hearts ripped out. We know the not-knowing how we will live without them. For some of us the tears come until there are no more tears. For others the tears never come at the time of the death, but come later when we least expect it. Today we have over sixty names who died within the past year. Each was loved and known by someone in this congregation. Each of their families are experiencing grief. I think of the Tree of Life congregation who gathered to worship yesterday for the first time after eleven were killed worshipping in their holy sanctuary. They are exhausted from their grief. I think of the families of the two who were killed in the Kroger store because the shooter could not get into a church. I think of the families who witnessed loved ones killed in Central America and are walking thousands of miles to seek sanctuary. I think of the families whose loved ones were killed in Syria and fled their homes to seek safety in Europe. I think of Dave Somerville’s two daughters who will bury their father on Tuesday. For all of these and others, grief is raw and real.

The tradition of All Saints Day creates for us a means to assist us on our journey of grief. For those in Latin America, the families go to the graves of their loved ones on All Soul’s Day and have a picnic as they tell stories of their loved ones. Celebrating All Saints Day is a way in which we can come together as a church, acknowledging our corporate pain and loss, and seek the hope we have in eternal life with God. What is this hope?

All of our scriptures point to this hope. In all of these we have images of heaven and eternal life with God. First, the prophet Isaiah is offering hope to the poor, needy, and oppressed. God comes to them and saves them. God takes care of their needs: gives them a feast, wipes away their tears, and swallows up death. This is an image of heaven. In Psalm 24 we have another image of heaven as we ascend to God’s holy throne celebrating God as Creator of all life. Then from John’s Gospel there is the resurrection of Lazarus with Jesus weeping even though he knows he has the power to give Lazarus life. The human Jesus mourned with his friends while the divine Jesus wept because of their unbelief. In his weeping we see the full

heart of God, weeping with us as we grieve and for us when we lack trust and faith in God. The raising of Lazarus from the dead becomes also a precursor of Jesus' own Resurrection and the hope of eternal life. And finally the passage from John's Revelation or vision where heaven comes to unite with the earth. The words of Isaiah are echoed again. God will wipe away our tears and death will be no more. These words offer us comfort and hope that our loved ones are no longer in pain and suffering, that death does not have the final word.

These images of heaven are distinct and different from the world we live, yet these scriptures point to heaven drawing near to our world. As Christians we believe that heaven came to earth in the fullness of Jesus. His ministry on earth, his death and resurrection bring heaven close to us. Biblical scholar and theologian N. T. Wright wrote, "'Going to heaven when you die' is not held out in the New Testament as the main goal." Scripture is more interested in how heaven comes to us and changes our lives now. As Christians we believe that we don't have to wait until the afterlife to begin spending eternity with God. Jesus brings us into God's world even as we continue to live in this one. Eternal life exists on both sides of the grave. Eternal life is knowing God and Jesus who was sent by God. Our hope isn't exclusively about reunions with those who have died before us, no matter how joyful we will be. Our hope is in the phrase in the Lord's Prayer when God's will is finally done "on earth as it is in heaven." This phrase implies that heaven is present wherever and whenever God's will is faithfully done. We don't need to die to experience a taste of heaven.

This is the counter testimony to hate and violence. When there is rejection of religion and moral principles, when values are not upheld, when there is the impulse to destroy, when there is extreme pessimism, Jesus declares, "I am the Resurrection and Life." Death does not have the final word. God in Christ freely enters into the suffering of the world that God created and offers love. We who believe in Jesus are to live as though death has no power over us. We are to live as though we belong to God in both life and death. We are to live our eternal life now because God is with us in our suffering. God is both weeping with us and wiping the tears from our eyes. We are to live in the face of death because Jesus is present with us. This kind of living is sainthood in the making. We are to believe and live according to God's will on earth. We are the counter testimony to hate and violence. We are to be examples of God's love shown to us through Jesus and offer compassion no matter how difficult so others will believe.

Going back to Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead, when some questioned Jesus ability from keeping Lazarus from dying, our scripture says, Jesus groaned. The Greek word used here is *embrimaomai* (em-brē-mä'-o-mī) which more closely interpreted is an angry snort. Jesus saw evil creeping into their midst and shows them that he can overcome both death and evil. Jesus uses his anger to create life and hope. In the midst of the evil of hate and violence, there is a type of anger that lies in the heart of hope. St. Augustine said that "Hope has two beautiful daughters. Anger at the way things are, and courage to see to it that things do not remain the way they are." Like Jesus, we saints-in-the-making can use our anger at the way things are and be courageous to be agents of hope and new life. This is God's will: for heaven to come to earth.

Resources: *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol 2*, David Bartlett, editor; www.ministrymatters.com: "All Saints Day" by James Howell; "Heaven" by Mike Potteet

