

Sermon
All Saints' Sunday
November 3, 2024

Today is All Saints' Sunday, the day we remember those who have died, the day we commemorate the saints of the Church gathered here with us, and one of four days we renew our baptismal vows. On top of all that, for me this day will always be our anniversary, the first Sunday we came together as priest and people. All of these things make today a joyful celebration.

All Saints' Sunday is already one of my top five days on the Church calendar, and this year, Year B, is my favorite year of the three. That's because the first two readings are also appointed for funerals, and the gospel reflects a deep abiding love between friends. Funerals, at least in the Episcopal church, are times when people are reminded of how much God loves them and of their love for each other and the person who has died.

In today's gospel, Lazarus has died. Mary and Martha have sent word to Jesus that he was ill, but then he died before Jesus could get there, and Jesus shows up four days after the fact. There are other stories about Mary, Martha, Lazarus, and Jesus scattered through the gospels giving us an idea that these three siblings had a close relationship with Jesus. We see some of this deep connection on display today when Jesus weeps at the tomb of his friend Lazarus.

Jesus is fully human and fully divine, and here we see a wholly human response to the death of a loved one. We all cry and mourn in our own way. For some reason, I tear up when officiating funerals, which drives me nuts, but that's another story. Hippolytus, a 1st and 2nd Century theologian, states that Jesus wept to give us an example of "weeping with those who weep." That might be a bit of a stretch. I prefer to think that the human side of Jesus was touched by grief, just as we are, and that grief can be overwhelming.

We read the names of those who died this past year at the beginning of the service. None of us know all those names, but their deaths caused grief and tears for those who did know them. That grief can be softened over time by our resurrection hope and our belief that those people have entered into glory. Even with that hope and faith, I have never attended or officiated a funeral where people were joyfully celebrating a death.

But as I said, our grief can be softened over time. I think our first two readings do that.

Isaiah gives us a vision of restoration, a time when enemies of the Lord are defeated and God's people are restored to wholeness. God's people are not only Jews, but anyone who worships the Lord. In this vision, all people are welcome to the banquet and all people will be free from oppression. On that day death will be no more and tears will be wiped away as a mother wipes away the tears of a crying child.

Today's reading from Revelation comes near the end of the book. In it we hear of a new heaven and a new earth, a time when all creation will be renewed and transformed, free from imperfections. Chaos, represented by the sea, will be no more. Death will be no more. Mourning and crying will be no more. God will dwell with us and all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well.

In these two readings, and even in the gospel passage, there is a hopeful vision of restoration. Isaiah talks of all people restored to wholeness in God. John sees a vision of unity with God where death and mourning and crying and pain are no more. Lazarus is restored to life to live with his family once again. On All Saints' Sunday these are hopeful visions that can help diminish the pain of death. They can also help us to not fear death as our faith tells us that all this, no matter how permanent it may seem, is only temporary with the glorious restoration yet to come.

Besides these readings of comfort and hope there's another reason All Saints' is one of my top five days of the Church year, and that is because this is what mystics call a thin place. There are places and times when the spiritual and the physical are drawn close together or touch. Sometimes these places are named as spooky - like a graveyard. Sometimes they are named as other-worldly - like a peculiar piece of nature. But they can also be a moment in time, like today.

Today is a thin place as we remember those who have gone before. It's a thin place as we hold them close to our heart and live in the faith and hope that they are in God's loving embrace. Today is also a day when we are reminded how extraordinary the ordinary actually is.

Every Sunday we gather to worship God, offer our thanks and praise, and share in a holy meal. Every Sunday we gather not to be entertained but to spend time in God's

holy presence. Every Sunday we recite ancient words and prayers, and sometimes that repetition dulls our senses to the mystical – until a day like today.

On this All Saints' Sunday, let us worship God not only with those gathered here, but with all those who have gone before and who have yet to come. Let us acknowledge that we worship God with angels and archangels, and ALL the company of heaven – saints above and saints below.

On this All Saints' Sunday, in the midst of the chaos swirling around us, here in this thin place, let us hold fast to Isaiah's vision of restoration and look forward to the time when all creation will be renewed, remembering that we are not alone, for the saints of the Church are gathered here with us.

Amen.