

All Saints B

John 11:32-44

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May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.

We don't talk about death, do we? As a society, as a culture, we talk around death. It happens on TV and in the movies, in the news far too often, in an uncountable number of video games, it happens in books – but we don't talk about it. Not in real life, not for how it effects day to day living, and it does, too! We don't share stories about it as a way to learn about what to do and what needs to be done when it happens.

I'm afraid what that leaves us with is a loose set of ideas based on the death we see in the movies regarding how we should react to it when it happens to us or around us. And let's be honest here, it is one thing we all have in common – regardless of our religion, our political beliefs, where we live, how much money we have or anything else. If you have figured a way around this I'd be very interested to speak to you after services.

Even though it is something we all share, it seems to be never comfortable or easy – I have described to some of you the work I have done recently with a woman who was in the final stages of her dying. She was at home on hospice care, and she and I spoke much about her fears, concerns, and sadness as it approached. As she got closer to the end, there was a comfort that she took in the approach of death – she spoke to me often about thinking of the large hands that would embrace her when the time came. These hands might have been Jesus – they might have been her husband who departed before she did. She never said specifically – and that was OK – she took comfort in this vision still.

As I say, not the most comfortable of topics, maybe, but the church set aside All Saints Day so we can honor and remember all the saints who have walked with us and touched our lives, the living and the dead.

In our Baptismal Covenant we profess the words: "I believe in... the communion of saints, ... the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting."

In the churches annual observance of All Saints' Day, and the Commemoration of All Faithful Departed on the following day, we make those words a tangible reality in the here and now by recognizing and celebrating our relationships, not only with those around us today, but also with all those who we remember but see no longer.

These celebrations are also tied to the natural cycle of the year as we experience them here in New England. Just as Passover and Easter reflect the phenomenon of rebirth in spring, autumn naturally turns our thoughts to death and eternity. Our pre-Christian and early Christian ancestors knew something about death because they lived so closely to it. They lived it in the annual cycle of planting and harvesting; of feasting and fasting; of spring, summer, fall and winter.

As the days shorten and the early darkness becomes part of our reality, our ancestors marked this season with various rituals centered around fire, food gathered at the harvest, and being conscious of those who had gone before us. So this season of year is a natural time for the Church to remember our loved ones who helped make us who we are today.

The natural cycle of the year is celebrated in many traditions – those who have passed are remembered in this time that the ancient Celts considered the veil between the worlds to be thin, increasing the chances we could see or hear those who have passed on. This, of course, becomes the root of many ghost stories around this time of year.

There are many traditions that honor those who have passed. In my home, my wife Kim every year creates an altar to honor the dead. This includes pictures of family that had departed and individuals we have known that have left this life in the past year. In the Mexican tradition, Los Dias de los Muertos, this altar would often be the center of a festive meal, with favorite foods and drinks of the departed left on their graves.

This is not a morbid preoccupation with death. This makes death a more recognized part of the cycle of life. If we can take the time to think of those we love, the story has not ended, and they live on in our memories. In Matthew, Jesus tells us “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.”

Death is an emotionally charged time. Even in today's Gospel we hear of Jesus being “greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved” in hearing of the death of his friend Lazarus. After asking to see where he was buried “Jesus began to weep”. Perhaps his weeping is in frustration with Mary's statement, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” Things are said after a death in the midst of sorrow, but sometimes they inflict pain. Consider the crowd then asking “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?”

Jesus then goes to the grave, and asks that the stone be removed. Mary, the sister of Lazarus, hesitates, offering “Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.” Jesus is undeterred. He offers ““Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?”

He then prays, offering himself back to God saying “Father, I thank you for having heard me. I 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." He knows this act is symbolic of his faith in God, and it will become the same for the people.

Then, the miracle "he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" And the dead man came out.

No one wants the story to end at the end of life. The woman I mentioned helping in Hospice (her name was Joan, since this is the day to remember those who have gone before us), She once looked at me with tears in her eyes saying this was not how she wanted the story to end. I told her at the time that it wasn't over yet, but we both knew the end was near.

Whether the story of the departed is over is really up to us, if you think about it. In a number of ways, I believe even the story of Jesus would be over if we did not tell his story, and believe the body of Christ lives on in us. Joan lives on, because I have shared a piece of her story today. Those saints you have known will live on in the lighting of the remembrance candles, which we will do shortly. I will offer a small prayer, then I invite you forward to the altar to light a candle for someone and remember. Take your time, there is no hurry – remember them in peace.

Maybe if we do this together, as community, it is less of a burden for us all. For today, we remember.

Each occasion

We glimpse them:

That turn of the head,

That smile,

The way she walked,

His sense of humor

Each time

A knife turns in our heart.

In time,

Through the window of our tears,

We see them

And smile.

In time,

We let go of sorrow,
In time,
Beauty and music
Remembered places
Bring solace not pain.
In your time,
God of all time,
May what we have sown in pain
Be reaped in joy.

Ever living God, bless these candles we light – let their flame be as sacred and as strong as our memories of those who have touched our lives. We ask that you hold them close, and we ask that you hold us close walking with us as we walk with those that have gone before us, even those we see no longer - *amen.*