

Isaiah 25:6-9, Gospel John 11:32-44: The Communion of Saints

November 4, 2018

THE HEBREW SCRIPTURES Isaiah 25:6-9

25 ⁶ On 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 And he will destroy on this mountain
the shroud that is cast over all peoples,
the sheet that is spread over all nations;

⁸ he will swallow up death forever.

Then the Lord GOD will wipe away the tears from all faces,
and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth,
for the LORD has spoken.

⁹ It will be said on that day,
Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us.
This is the LORD for whom we have waited;
let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.

Reader: The Word of the Lord

People: Thanks be to God.

*THE GOSPEL

John 11:32-44

NRSV

25 ³² When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." ³³ When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. ³⁴ He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." ³⁵ Jesus began to weep. ³⁶ So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" ³⁷ But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" ³⁸ Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. ³⁹ Jesus 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." ⁴⁰ Jesus 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. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. ⁴² 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." ⁴³ When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" ⁴⁴ The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

Reader: The Gospel of the Lord. **People:** Praise to you, Lord Christ.

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How far back does your memory go? Age 10? 5? 3? Take a moment and let your mind wander back...how far back does it go? I have a memory from 2 ½; it involved putting my coat on upside down and backwards. Pretty good right? Pretty embarrassing, too, as I recall.

How far back *does your* memory go? When we consider our memories we usually think *in our lifetime* -- which makes sense. But the truth is we also have collective memory, and our *collective* memories go back...how far?

How many of you know the stories of your grandparents or your great grandparents or farther still? How many of you have family who came on the Mayflower? How many of you trace your lineage to royalty or indigenous peoples? But let's go even further back than that.

Because however far back your *familial* memory goes, your *faith* memory -- gifted to you by the Bible -- goes back *thousands* of years. We wander through the wilderness with the Israelites after we were slaves in Egypt.

Just a titch over 2000 years ago we all have a *very special* collective memory—maybe even a picture memory—of when Jesus was born—something we will begin to consider and anticipate soon. Very soon. In just a few weeks.

But first, before remembering *birth* and *rebirth*—we remember *death*. Lazarus' death...as we remember those who died—especially this year. Of course, on this day, our memories don't stay in 2017-2018. For me, my "All Saints" memory goes back before I was born to when my first grandfather died on his 50th birthday in 1957. Then my grandmother died in 1984 in Norway. Then it starts to get real up close and personal when my older brother, Stephen, died in 1989 at the age of 30 and four months into his marriage. My other grandfather died within that year. Then my father died in 2005...my friend, Diane, in 2006, my friend, Roe, in 2017, and then my 26 year old little brother, Kristian, just a few short months ago...I've given you my short list, because I know you have your own list. We all have our "All Saints Memories" don't we? ()

Our immediate familial memories go back a certain 100 years or so...but our collective memories know no such restrictions. Yet, collectively, we can easily go back 1500 years on this All Saints Day, because—as Christians—we have been honoring—no, let's use the right word—*celebrating*—this day, this *All Saints Day*—for that long -- 1500 years!

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It was begun to remember—no, let's use the *right* word—*celebrate* all those saints who didn't just die, but died *because* of their faith. 1500 years ago, the persecution of early Christians had gotten so bad that there simply weren't enough days in the year anymore to celebrate all those who had been martyred for their faith. Can you imagine?! So? We declared one day for all of them. To celebrate their lives, their perseverance, their faithfulness, their examples—even unto death—*and as martyrs*—it was unto death.

Somewhere, in this window of history, we reconsidered the word “martyr” and began to call them “saints”. This was the word that the Apostle Paul used in his letters when he was addressing all those who followed the Risen Christ. So, here I am this morning, standing before a roomful of followers -- a roomful of *saints*—*speaking* to the saints. Hello saints!

On this All Saints Sunday when we will speak the names of all those people whom death has stolen away from us this year, we read scripture passages about death...and catch a glimpse of how we people of God are to deal with this interloper, are to understand this disrupter, this disrepute, this villain we call death.

We began with Isaiah—our collective 2700 year old memory whom we heard from today— who assures us that our Lord God is going to swallow up death forever one of these days and then will wipe away our tears.

Isaiah—provocative, prophetic voice before the immediacy of TV, before Cable, before WiFi, before cell phones (sigh!)—reminds us to *wait* on God—and while we wait—to be glad and rejoice. You know what I say to that? I say, “Well, that's easy for *you* to say, Isaiah, but *you* don't know the world we live in *now!*”

On days like today, we like to think that Isaiah just doesn't understand -- doesn't *get* -- the world we live in right now. My head is spinning over the events of the last few weeks alone. Susan Henry-Crowe, director of the United Methodist Church & Society enumerates them this way:

- *The horrific murders of 11 faithful Jewish worshipers in an anti-Semitic attack at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.*
- *The horrific killing of two African-Americans by a white supremacist at a grocery store in Jeffersontown, Kentucky, following the suspect's failed attempt to enter a nearby predominantly black church.*
- *Another school shooting in Charlotte, North Carolina.*

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- *The antidemocratic mailing of more than a dozen pipe bombs to political opponents.*
- *The sending of the U.S. military to the U.S.-Mexico border, coupled with the enhancement of administrative policies designed to dehumanize the children, men and women seeking asylum from violence and poverty."*

(Susan Henry-Crowe, United Methodist Church & Society, emailed letter, November 2, 2018)

That's a lot! So, what could Isaiah possibly know about our world today? What does he have to say to us, to our world today?

Well, plenty, actually. Our memory fails us if we forget the violent world that Isaiah lived in, from which he has sent these words of hope.

In his world 2700 years ago, God's children were being oppressed and killed by competing rulers who saw them as no more than grains of pesky sand, dust to be brushed aside to make room for their ambition. If we truly look into Isaiah's eyes we see them creased by age, reddened by his own tears and we can be assured that Isaiah knows our challenges and our losses. So let's hear his words as we would a trusted friend; Isaiah said: ⁹ It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God; *we have waited for him*, so that he might save us. *This is the LORD for whom we have waited*; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.

In other words, Isaiah said, "*Be patient.*" "*Trust.*" "*God is still here.*" Our memories reach back and we *hear* him; but—*do we listen?*

Then we have our Gospel reading this morning. Did we hear *Jesus* this morning? Does he not also weep for the loss of his friend, Lazarus who has died, and for Lazarus' sisters Mary and Martha in their grief? I'm sure!

Does he also weep because they—his closest friends—*still do not understand that God is swallowing up death in Jesus himself?*

Does he also cry from frustration because we can't seem to find our way through our grief to hear the eternal truth that is Jesus the Christ? "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die." Jesus said these words to Martha just prior to our reading this morning. And then he asked her a question, "Do you believe this?"

And there is one question for us. "Do you believe this?" Is death the final end? Or did Jesus change it? Swallow up death? The Apostle Paul, who never met Jesus, but who did meet the Risen Christ, came to this conclusion

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which he first poses as a question: "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" and answered it with this, "I am convinced that *neither death nor life*, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." Did Christ swallow up death? Paul says YES!

(So, to echo Jesus' question) "Do you believe this?" Such are the really deep questions of our faith. We begin to contemplate such depths during our earliest years days when we lack much of life's experience and we continue to wrestle them to the ground at whatever age we are now. Wrestle on!

But, perhaps, there is another important question in this story that we have more control over and here it is: As we see Jesus bring Lazarus back from the dead, what is he bringing him back to? Certainly, where Lazarus was going was the wonderful place of eternity of which we speak. So, if we are to look at this story for its significance, what was Jesus bringing Lazarus back to and for? Well, we don't know; the scriptures don't tell us!

But we can ask that question of ourselves: For every time that we die a bit: for every despair, every loss, every painful struggle -- why are we being recalled to life? When we turn to God, to Jesus, to the Holy Spirit and say, "Yes!" to a life following Jesus, what are we being born anew for?

Susan Henry-Crowe, who I mentioned before, sharpened my own answer yesterday in her letter when we wrote:

We are claimed by the Creator, forever embraced and born anew.

To be recalled to life is to turn from our ways of violence and hatred.

To be recalled to life is to live into our creator's desire for each of us to be whole.

To be recalled to life is to work to make a world where every human is afforded this divinely-ordained dignity.

(Referencing Charles Dickens' 'War & Peace', she said,) It is not the worst of times. It is not the best of times. It is a time when people of faith are recalled to life — a life of resurrection and a life of hope.

We overcome death every time we chose to love our neighbor instead of hate them.

We vanquish death from the room when we chose to love our enemies and pray for them.

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We proclaim death is no more when we state with full courage -- or even with knees knocking together -- that what separates us from our loved ones is simply a door that we cannot go through until it is our time. It's just a door -- or, as Paul referred to it -- a veil that we can't see through.

But our loved ones *are with God* even as much as *we are with God here and now*. That's the thing about our memory and God's memory -- our time and God's time. We forget; but God does not forget. We get lost in *our* time. But, in reality, time is eternal, *infinite* -- stretching beyond the stars and beyond our imaginations and beyond our grief and beyond our lost.

So, today, as we come to the Communion Table -- this table that was set for us 2000 years ago -- and, yet also just this very morning, let yourself rest in this mystery of time and memory.

Experience the living Christ who was, and is, and will be again.

And, while we receive, as we name the saints who have gone before us into eternity this year, allow yourself to experience the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sin, and the resurrection that leads from death to new life right now -- for such a time as this.

Blessings on the journey. Amen.