

Jesus gives us new life

Sermon preached at St. Peter and St. Paul, Marietta, GA

by The Rev. Tom Pumphrey, November 4, 2018

All Saints Sunday (year B), Wisdom 3:1-9; Revelation 21:1-6; John 11:32-44

Wisdom 3:1-9, NRSV: *But the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and no torment will ever touch them. In the eyes of the foolish they seemed to have died, and their departure was thought to be a disaster, and their going from us to be their destruction; but they are at peace. For though in the sight of others they were punished, their hope is full of immortality. Having been disciplined a little, they will receive great good, because God tested them and found them worthy of himself; like gold in the furnace he tried them, and like a sacrificial burnt offering he accepted them. In the time of their visitation they will shine forth, and will run like sparks through the stubble. They will govern nations and rule over peoples, and the Lord will reign over them forever. Those who trust in him will understand truth, and the faithful will abide with him in love, because grace and mercy are upon his holy ones, and he watches over his elect.*

Revelation 21:1-6 *Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away." And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true." Then he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.*

John 11:32-44: *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." When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"*

*Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. 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." Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "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." When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" 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."*

Today we celebrate the Feast of All Saints. All Saints Sunday is one of those times in the church year especially appropriate for the celebration of Baptism, where we welcome new saints into the life of Christ. This is a time of great joy, when we dress the church in white and use special music. Baptism is also serious business, where candidates renounce the world, the flesh and the devil and trust in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Baptism is serious joy: Baptism is about being dead to sin and alive in Christ. Jesus came to this broken world to give us new life.

The Feast of All Saints is also about the communion of saints. The communion of saints includes those newly Baptized and the community of the faithful that support them in their life in Christ. The communion of saints also includes those saints who have gone before us, because we all are alive in Christ.

Our readings today reflect this shared life among the faithful living and the faithful who have died in the Lord: the church in action and the church triumphant. We hear about our hope in God far greater than death. We hear of the new heaven and new earth that awaits us at the last day, where death will be no more, neither mourning or crying or pain. For the first things will pass away, and God will make all things new.

In today's Gospel reading, we hear of Jesus raising of Lazarus from the dead. This is a sign of our own hope in the resurrection that awaits us. This is also a sign of God's power over death even today.

I am struck by the description of Jesus in this passage. Here is Jesus who has preached hope in the resurrection. Here is Jesus who has healed people and set them free. Here is Jesus who knows he can raise Lazarus from the dead and who is already planning to raise Lazarus. And yet, when he meets Martha on the way, he is deeply moved and deeply grieved. When he meets Mary, she says the same as Martha: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Jesus sees her tears, and he sees the weeping of the crowd, some of whom who in their grief find it hard to believe in him. Jesus sees all this grief, and Jesus himself is deeply grieved. Even Jesus, the Lord of life, weeps with them. Lazarus was his friend. Mary and Martha were his friends, and it pains him to see the pain of death and loss and the frustration and anger and powerlessness it breeds.

This is the broken world that Jesus loves deeply. This is the broken world whose suffering and loss grieves Jesus. This is the broken world to which Jesus came to bring new life.

Even today, we see that ours is a world broken by conflict and sadness, illness and death. Every day, the news has more messages of darkness and fear. Like the crowds, we struggle in frustration to deal with these hardships. One response I've noticed developing in recent years is a kind of language that embraces death as an end to suffering. But in Jesus' eyes, death is not our friend. Jesus doesn't paper over death or ask us to be happy about death. Rather, Jesus overcomes death and conquers it as a defeated enemy. Jesus comes to this broken world and brings us new life.

Even as Jesus wept by Lazarus' grave. Jesus called the crowd to open the grave. Jesus calls to Lazarus to come out. His once dead friend comes out bound in burial cloths. Jesus says to the crowd "unbind him and set him free." Jesus raises Lazarus as a gift to him, and to his sisters and to the crowd. Jesus raises Lazarus as a sign to us of our resurrection to come. Lazarus does not become immortal when Jesus raises him. Like the miraculous healings that we see from time to time, this is but a foretaste of the resurrection to come. This is a sign of the fullness of new life that Jesus brings us.

These readings from scripture are good news for us as we remember those who have died. This is also good news for us who still live. Jesus came to give us life not just at the end of all things. Jesus came to give us life in this life also. The new life that Jesus gives us begins today, and finds its fullness in the life to come.

Even in the face of death, we can find God at work, revealing himself and redeeming the time. So often, I see God provide unique moments of conversation and connection among families as they gather with a dying loved one. These are times of reconciliation and connection, where God renews and restores families with his grace. In other cases, we see miraculous healing that blesses us with more years together. We also see God restore broken relationships with new life, and restore broken people with new life. We see God go to the darkest of places of addiction and despair and bring new life that once felt impossible.

God moves in these miraculous ways and God moves in ordinary and quiet ways in the lives of each of us—in you and me. God can work through you to bring some of that new life to others. The church, at its best, is a community where this happens all the time. When we promise to support the newly baptized in their life in Christ, we join with a greater promise to support each other in our life in Christ. Where one grieves, others encourage. Where one struggles, others support. Even if you hide your pain, know that there are others in this place praying for you, asking God to open your heart to know his healing power and his joy.

This is the life in Christ that we can take to the world as well. When the world is filled with anger and prejudice and violent rhetoric, you can be the voice of reason and respect and kindness. You can bring out the best in others caught up in the brokenness of this world. You can bring Jesus' grace and mercy to heal the hurt and division we find. Each day is a gift from God. Each day, God is at work, quietly reaching into our lives. We can seek him out. We can find God there, we can help others see God's redeeming power still at work bringing us new life.

On the Feast of All Saints, we give thanks for God's blessings given to us in the communion of saints. We thank God for the blessings found in each new day. We give thanks for the new life that we can see in the eyes of children beginning their life in Christ in Baptism.

As Christians, we embrace not death, but life. We embrace not just this earthly life that God has given us; we also embrace the new life in Christ that God offers to this broken world. Each day, we can find God redeeming us, healing us, restoring us, dead to sin and alive in Christ. Each day, Jesus brings us new life.