

All Saints B (11/4/2018)

Isaiah 25:6-9

Psalm 24

Revelation 21:1-6a

John 11:32-44

In spite of our day-to-day denial, we live forever in death's shadow. Mourning and crying and pain are natural and appropriate responses to death's grip on our lives. Nevertheless, the promise of death undone in the end sustains us in the present, removing the grave clothes that bind us and replacing them with the garment of hope.

"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."

The promise of our second reading from Revelation, very near the end of the Bible, is that in the fullness of time God's presence will pervade the Earth such that our fragile and often painful existence will be utterly transformed: "Death will be no more," the author foretells, "mourning and crying and pain will be no more."

I'll admit that this vision of the future, beautiful as it may be, is hard for me to see today. The signs of death's apparent stranglehold are everywhere. A friend's steady surrender to cancer, the casual state-sanctioned murder of a political dissident, even the common sight of an animal's remains by the side of the road – these are facts that fly in the face of the promise of abundant life. Last week's massacre at Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh is the freshest

wound, yet another indicator that **death cruelly, relentlessly lays claim to our lives. We live in a Good Friday world.**

It's no surprise that we're reluctant to confront death honestly and fully. There exists a strong tendency in our culture to deny death. We go to great lengths, for instance, to conceal the marks of aging, as if aging weren't perfectly natural, and we refuse to give up the symbols of our youthful independence – the freedom to live on our own or drive a car. Even at the time of death, we resist using the language of death. Instead we say that the deceased have “passed away” or “gone to be with the Lord.” And, we forego funerals in favor of “celebrations of life,” that is, if our loved ones allow us to organize a gathering in their memory at all.

In a remarkable new trend, some funeral homes in Puerto Rico and New Orleans now offer the option to erase even the appearance of death by posing the deceased as if they're still alive. It's called “extreme embalming.” For example, when Mickey Easterling, a well-known New Orleans socialite, died in 2014, her family hired Jacob Schoen and Son funeral home to arrange for her send-off. Patrick Schoen explained in an interview:

The premise of the whole memorial, basically, was that she was hosting a party. It was a champagne party, and the [idea] was that she went out into her garden and basically sat down on her bench after the party, and went into a slumber... With the champagne still in her hand, which was in Waterford crystal. In the other hand she had a cigarette.

He elaborated on the tone of the event:

It wasn't very somber, you know what I mean? It's not like you walk into the funeral home, you see the casket and all that—when you see a presentation like [Ms. Easterling's], you don't have the same feeling. It's more like a happy feeling, to be honest with you. Like, "Look how nice she looks." It kind of makes you feel like you were all just at a party. And that's what she wanted. She wanted a celebration of life.¹

Why is it that we resist acknowledging the fact of death? I suspect it's because death's certainty, death's finality would devastate us if we were to really take it in every time it stared us in the face. We prefer to look away, to close our browser, to focus on "how nice she looks," anything to avoid feeling the loss, the pain, the fear too deeply.

But, the hard truth is that we live forever in death's shadow.² And every once in a while, in spite of our day-to-day denial, death comes near. The agonizing headline, the dreaded phone call, the bleak diagnosis – these moments cut to the heart of what it means to be mortal, what it means to live in a Good Friday world.

And, so long as we live in a Good Friday world, grief is to be expected. **Mourning and crying and pain are natural and appropriate responses to death's grip on our lives, and we shouldn't suppress them just to put on a strong face or to pretend that we're not affected by death.** Take Jesus as your model. He doesn't hold back at the news of his friend's death, but weeps openly, angrily, without concern for what others might think. "See how he loved him!" the bystanders observe.

¹ Drew Schwartz, "Inside the Funeral Homes Posing the Dead Like They're Still Alive," https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/9kmgv7/inside-new-orleans-extreme-embalming-funerals.

² <https://members.sundaysandseasons.com/Home/TextsAndResources/2018-11-4/1964#resources>.

Yet, even in the depth of his own grief, Jesus speaks a powerful word of life. “Lazarus, come out!” he cries, and the dead man hobbles out of the tomb, still bound in his grave clothes. Isn’t that a compelling image for life in the shadow of death? Like Lazarus, we are all wrapped tightly in death’s rags: frailty, fear, fatalism.³ But, Lazarus does not remain bound. The last act of resurrection is his release from the grave clothes. “Unbind him, and let him go!” Jesus instructs the risen man’s loved ones and neighbors. And they do.

What does it mean for us to be released from the grip of death, even as we accept its reality? What does it mean to live in a Good Friday world, yet to be an Easter people? The raising of Lazarus is a symbol of God’s final sovereignty over death in all its forms. And, the promise of death undone in the end sustains us in the present, removing the grave clothes that bind us and replacing them with the garment of hope. There are times when that hope is weak, nevertheless it springs eternal. Dear church, it’s in the spirit of resurrection hope that we remember our loved ones this All Saints Sunday, and not only our loved ones, but all the saints whom God has clothed with death-defying love over the millennia. And, it’s in the spirit of resurrection hope that we unbind each other from death’s clutch today, taking hold of life eternal, the life that Christ grants us both now and in the time to come.

³ Ibid.