

The Good News

St. Mary's Church, Newton Lower Falls, MA 02462

617-527-4769 Email: office@st-Marys-episcopal.org

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Confronting Death on All Saints' Day

Editor: The following article was adapted from a sermon delivered on November 1 by The Reverend Ms. Margaret Schwarzer. For a discussion of the significance of All Saints' Day, see "The Ask-It Basket" on page 4.

Says The Wisdom of Solomon: "The souls of the righteous are in the hands of God...in the eyes of the foolish they seem 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."

Says Mary in the Gospel: "Lord, if you had been there, my brother would not have died." These two statements seem to frame our Christian discourse on death. On the one hand, Solomon proclaims what our faith teaches us about the immortality of the soul and the graciousness of God; on the other hand, Mary's lament to Jesus speaks of the sorrow and longing that death often carries with it. Her words are repeated in many of our own hearts when someone we love dies: "Jesus, if you had been there...."

Sometimes our loved ones' deaths are easy for them, and other times their struggles are full of pain, or slow degeneration, and their sufferings are almost as hard to watch as they must be to experience. Then, like Mary, we can wonder about what feels like God's absence as well as God's presence: "if you had been there, he/she would not have died."

To see God's blessing in the death of another human being is a difficult, if not impossible, task. We are emotionally built to mourn those we love, and we are biologically built to fear what we cannot understand.

Yet today, in the Christian tradition, we hold up the mystery of death and the friends and loved ones who have gone on before us as we celebrate All Saints' Day. We are asked to contemplate what we can never fully understand: our transitory bodies, our own immortal souls, and the communion of saints—both the living and the dead—who are bound to us as they, and we, continue to move more and more into the heart of God. We travel humble and difficult ground this morning. Of course, any one of us who is still breathing is, by definition, a novice and not an expert, in the subject of death and the afterlife, so I offer my thoughts as one Christian adventurer among many. What do we need to say on All Saints' Day about death and our own journey towards it?

First, I want to draw our attention to a few things that our Gospel lesson makes clear by both what it says and what it does not say. What our Gospel story articulates for us is that grief and glory can be tied together in this life. (The Reverend Jerry Street, *Christian Century*) Jesus, the son of God, weeps at the death of his friend. Jesus, though he is God, is not immune to the power or sorrow of death. He cries at his friend's death, and I imagine he cries at Mary's and Martha's grief as well. Whatever it is, death is such a radical change that unless our name is Lazarus or Jesus, we will never come back to this fragile earth once we have experienced it. If Christian hope teaches us that death is not the last word, it is still a hard word, still a tough journey to watch or experience, even for Jesus. Jesus wept, and so can we, and so do we. There is nothing inconsistent with being a person of great faith and a person of great grief.

What the Gospel story also reminds us about, is the odd way in which our creation and our destruction are part of the same experience. Another way to say this is to say that in this life “flesh is the price of admission.” All the marvelous, juicy, intoxicating, joyful things that happen to us while we abide on this planet happen to us because we are incarnate—enfleshed—and, at the same time, being enfleshed is a guarantee that we cannot last. The glory and the grief of our human condition is that we are, by our nature and God’s design, fickle and unstable and biodegradable. No matter how omnipotent we feel, none of us will get out of this adventure alive. God’s gift of life to us is also God’s burden upon us. If we are people of God, we are also still people. Even Lazarus, who is brought back from the dead, will have to die again.

But it is also true that in this Gospel what is not said about death is as powerful as what is said. For instance, scripture does not say how Lazarus is greeted after his return from the dead, but this is undoubtedly not because it was unimportant, but because it was so complex and so dramatic an event that words failed everyone, and so no words were recorded. What is obvious in the story, but never said out loud, is that anyone who saw Lazarus rise after four days of death would be confronted with the reality of the powers of God being greater than the powers of death, and that is good news for all of us. If the powers of God are greater than the powers of death, then it just may be God’s plan for all of us, each of us, to go through this terrible and acute transformation for a reason which we cannot currently appreciate.

Perhaps, as the Solomon reading asserted, there are times in life’s journey when we are to be refined like gold in a furnace. It is a bit disturbing to imagine that God cares more for our soul’s development than our body’s safety, but it may be true. The caterpillar will become a butterfly, whether or not it agrees to do so; and so will we be transformed beyond our current understanding, whether or not we agree to the procedure. Nevertheless, if God is more powerful than death, the death we die is done in the presence of God, not the absence of God, and God walks with us through it. God does not abandon us. God is in the tomb, and God is outside the tomb, calling to each of us: “Come out!”

Another unmentioned glory in the Gospel story is how the fact of death is also met with the fact of hope in Jesus himself. Jesus’ raising of Lazarus points us towards his own Easter resurrection, and the power of God to renew, and refresh and transform all that ever was or ever will be. “Behold,” says God, “I make all things new.” When we walk with Jesus as our savior, we do not deny death, but we can also walk in hope in the face of death. “I am the resurrection and the life.” Jesus says. Whatever befalls us in our own stories of living and dying, our hope is to rest in Him. If we cannot know why our lives, or the lives of those we love, hold a fierce mix of blessing and suffering, we can trust that the answer to how to negotiate our way through it all lies with Him. As Lazarus discovers, the one who will unbind us and set us free is Jesus.

In contrast to our scripture’s preoccupation with death this morning, our modern culture shies away from death. In fact, modern culture is so determined to avoid death that it makes it possible for us to act as if death never really has to happen.

Advertisements, the stories we tell about aging (like 60 is the new 50) and the euphemisms we have for death make it very difficult to talk about death or dying at all. And when this subject becomes taboo, it almost appears as if death were the thing that could truly undo us all. Ironically, this unwillingness to confront and reflect upon death may keep us all tied up in a kind of death more fierce than the biological kind. The denial of our own death can let us wander through life without a very clear sense of the preciousness of time or the need to live deeply and thoughtfully in our own skin. If we convince ourselves that we do not have to think about death much, we can also choose to pretend that we will live forever and neither resolve what is most uncomfortable in our own lives nor celebrate the loves and the gifts which are truly and uniquely our own.

Denying death can be the ultimate lie which keeps us trapped in a life that is less dimensional, less passionate, less sacred than the one God envisioned for us. Though they are far from complete, our reflections on death begin to point us in a direction where we can balance the power of death against the bold and life-affirming powers of God. We can begin to recognize where true power lies. Death is real, and sometimes terribly painful deaths happen.

But death happens in a context where the final word always belongs to God. All Saints' Day invites us to mourn those we deeply miss while we also stand firm in the glory of a limited but soulful life on earth. With Mary, we can mourn those we miss, and with Solomon, we can live into the promise that they, and we, will rest in peace. The Christian promise is that our souls are immortal, but body-bounded. We are not eternal; we are part of creation, part of it all, and that is the glory we are given on earth. That is the "feast" God has given us to keep. Living or dead, nothing can separate us from the love of God; living or dead, we belong to God and to each other. Let us keep the feast. Amen.

The Prayers of the People on All Saints' Day

Let us pray for all people of all ages, for all who, young and old, belong to each other, that we may not be divided but may with one mind claim the love, faith, and hope of a Christian life.

Let us pray for all children, for all among us who are defenseless and small, for a happy childhood. Let us pray that nothing may harm them, that their lives may not become distorted, that we do not give them scandal or teach them to hate, but that we may lead them to know the truth.

Let us pray for our young people whose lives lie ahead of them, that they may go forward with open and receptive minds to meet their future, that they may live with life's uncertainties and face disappointments that they may learn to accept themselves and not lose heart.

Let us pray for those who are in the prime of life, that their lives may be fruitful, that they may not be self-seeking, but seek the welfare of others. We pray for all adults, whether married or single, that they may not be lonely, complacent, or closed to others, but they may go on seeking each other's friendship and thus grow in humanity.

Let us pray for all older people, that they may stay young in heart, that they may have wisdom and openness and not be resentful or envious. Let us pray for the aged, that they may not be left behind in life, but still put their experience to good use in the service of others and be treated with respect and affection.

Let us pray for all who have died, especially since our last commemoration of All Saints' Day: *Irene Blank, Mark David DiMino, Barbara Briggs Haviland, David Hodgdon, Bobby Model, Bruce Mossman, Harriet E. H. Schwarzer, Arthur & Larry Walton, and also, for Philip Virgil Lewis, Sr.*

Let us pray for ourselves, that young or old, we may constantly be made new by God's grace, that we may banish from our midst all discord and mistrust, and that God may keep us together as father and son, as mother and daughter, as one family and one people. We ask you this through Jesus Christ. Amen.

Upcoming Events

Children's Eucharist on Sunday, November 8 at 10:00 a.m.

St. Mary's is planning a Children's Service in which all children are invited to participate (with adult leadership) as usher, alms bearer, acolyte, reader or junior choir member. If your child is interested and is not already scheduled to serve as Acolyte or Junior Choir Member, please contact Isabel Phillips, our Director of Religious Education at: reading_doctor@comcast.net or: (978) 852-4633 or (781) 899-2530.

The Children's Service will be a service of Holy Communion led by Margaret Schwarzer and will feature both the Junior Choir and a short homily by two of our older youth. These young people will offer their reflections on the topic of: "Stewardship from a Place of Gratitude." If you are a student in middle school or high school and would like to share your own thoughts and reflections with St. Mary's on November 8th, please let Isabel Phillips or Jeffrey Hughes know.

There will be a short rehearsal on Saturday November 7th from 9:30-10:15 a.m. in preparation for the November 8th Children's Service. All children who will be participating in the service should plan to attend (including the acolytes scheduled for Sunday November 8th, as well as all members of the Junior Choir). Immediately before or after this rehearsal, children of St. Mary's are encouraged to help sort clothes with other Cradles to Crayons volunteers working for the needy children of Massachusetts!

Evensong with Music of Taizé – Sunday, November 8 at 5:00 p.m.

The Adult Choir will lead a meditative service of Evening Prayer in the tradition of Taizé. We will gather in the candlelit sanctuary for a quiet service of contemplation and music.

The liturgy of the Taizé service is meant to "quiet the soul." There is repetition in the words of the music, there is time for silence and prayer. There is no sermon or celebration of the Eucharist. The service provides an opportunity to become more peaceful and centered in the midst of our busy lives. Please join us for the Evensong service on November 8, followed by a soup and bread supper in the Parish Hall. All are welcome.

Foods'n Fancies on Saturday, November 21 10:00 a.m.-2:00 p.m.

Foods'n Fancies is the only fundraiser St. Mary's has for outreach. The number of organizations which benefit from this event is extensive. Everyone's help is much needed and appreciated. That includes men and women, young and old, new members and old members.

Please help now by searching your home for furniture, jewelry, sports equipment, etc. which you no longer use and could be sold through our silent auction. If you are a creative crafts person, donations would be appreciated, e.g., handmade mittens, socks (both adults and children.) Parishioners will be asked to contribute homemade foods. Volunteers to help set up and work at Foods'n Fancies will be needed. The sign-up sheet is on the bulletin board. This is a great event at which to purchase gifts and food for the holidays, while donating to non-profits throughout the world. Have lunch and shop while your children are involved in arts and crafts activities. We hope to see everyone on the 21st.

The "Ask It" Basket

Q: What is the significance of All Saints' Day?

A: All Saints' Day is a universal festival of the Church. This festival day directs our attention to the richness of Christian history and the varied experiences of the grace of God by lifting up the lives of the saints. The custom of commemorating all the martyrs of the Church on a single day goes back at least to the third century. All Saints' Day (November 1) celebrates not only the martyrs and saints, but all the people of God, living and dead, who together form the mystical body of Christ. Traditionally, we remember in our prayers all who have died since All Saints' Day last year, and we give thanks for their lives.

Editor: Tim Green