



With Us Still

*Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsobn given for the people of St. John's Episcopal Church
December 11, 2022, The Service of Loss & Remembrance*

A college friend of mine name Amy Van Meter developed adult-onset multiple sclerosis after college was over. She lived with it more than twenty years, after she had been confined to a wheelchair. But eventually she began to have significant and constant neurological pain that couldn't be alleviated by morphine or any drug. It was unrelenting and terrible. And so eventually, in 2010, she decided to stop eating. It was a choice she made very carefully after a lot of conversation with her husband and closest friends. And that was one time that Facebook was actually useful. A small group of us from college, mostly from choir, formed a private Facebook group and kept vigil with her and her husband over the weeks that followed. We constantly posted messages of love and support. Amy's choice and suffering were beyond our imagination or judgment. After more than four profoundly difficult weeks she died. Many of us flew in from all over the country to Santa Barbara, close to where I was born, for her funeral. Amy had been in the choir in college, and so many of us from choir sang two songs in her funeral that she had loved. We sang them *a capella* in beautiful Trinity Episcopal church downtown where Amy had been a member. Both of those songs are in our service today. There is a Balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole, we sang. There is a Balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul. And finally, what wondrous love is this, O my soul.

I can never hear those songs without remembering Amy and those weeks and that breathtaking, loving funeral. Amy suffered terribly, but somehow, she found strength and beauty. She ended her life affirming and yearning for freedom, imagining that despite M.S. taking her singing voice from her, she would be singing again with all the company of heaven.

All of us have our own experiences of loss. For some of us it is those we have loved so deeply that to live without them is unimaginable, and yet, we are still here. Some of us have been through divorce or illness, or have lost faith, or hope, or joy. And yet, we are still here. What are we to do with this grief, these wounds, these scars, these memories?

I deeply appreciate that ours is not a Pollyanna faith that naively assumes all is well. I remember returning to Christian faith after a long absence and re-reading the book of Genesis. Frankly, my first reaction was, well this is bleak. But I appreciated that we weren't afraid to tackle what is messy about life. It saw the endless drama of human existence and God's relentless movement toward humanity for love and covenant, as well as God's unwillingness to forever tolerate human violence and wrongdoing. But today, ours is not to explain a plausible theology of why things are the way they are. Today, I invite you to see the great stories of our tradition differently. Today I invite you to look closely at the gritty humanity in them, to see the suffering and the redemption in them, to know that you are not alone, to understand what a wise and mature hope can be.

Come with me on a journey of imagination, if you are willing. Instead of seeing Jesus in terms of abstract theology, see him as an indigenous spiritual ancestor in whose lineage we stand. See that he was a young man who was utterly captivated by the fire in his own tradition that seemed so unrepresented in the way it was practiced in synagogues and the Temple.

See how full of compassion he was, how healing overflowed out of him in the midst of raw human experience. See how terrible his suffering was, what his mother had to watch, what his dearest companion Mary Magdalene had to see, what his disciples endured in their abandonment and grief and shame. See that no grave could hold him. See that in real ways we cannot explain in the mystery of faith, he is with us still. He is with us in the words of Julian of Norwich, the ecstatic 12th century saint who held a hazelnut in her palm and knew it as the entire cosmos held in God's hand, who said that All will be well, not out of naivete or denial but from the indestructible communion with the living Christ who taught her nothing but love. Christ is with us in the sacredness of all life planted more deeply than all that is wrong. He is with us in the miracle of yearly resurrection we call spring, when life sprouts again from the warming earth after the long death of winter.

In this world of endless change, of birth and growth and declining and death, there is a heartbeat that repeats again and again. You can see it in the seasons that follow one another no matter what, in sunset and sunrise, in the phases of the moon, in the tides of the ocean, in the ice ages and the warming earth. The heartbeat is the love of God in Christ that binds us all together, in which nothing is ever truly lost, terrible though our suffering sometimes is. In our funeral liturgy we insist that in death and loss, life is changed, not ended. In physics we know that matter is never lost. In fact matter and energy appear to be the same thing, perhaps much as ice and water and steam are the same thing. Our bodies dissolve into earth or release into fire and then feed countless other living beings. Our spiritual selves, our legacies and memories, live on and nourish others with our quirkiness and the good that we do and the love that we offer. We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, our spiritual ancestors who have gone before us, who are as intimately present to us as the air we breathe, if only we have the spiritual sensitivity to recognize them.

Although the losses are profound, I find myself full of a great gratitude borne of the marriage between awe and loss. If you cannot feel this, if you are drowning in grief, it is OK. We will hold you, just as you all will hold me when it is my turn to be drowning. What has helped me is to go out and be intimately present to the natural world, just as Jesus would often go out into the wilderness or on the mountain to pray. I don't think Jesus went into the wilderness so much to get away from everything as to go to creation itself, to the presence of God inherent in the rocks and sky and trees. Let them be your teachers. Let the natural world, another incarnation of God's love in physical form, show you what rises from the ashes of grief and loss. Let the stories of our tradition lend you their compassion. Let this community become the palm of God's hand for you, holding you, affirming in this time of advent hope that life will grow again, although we are in the darkest and coldest time of the year. For nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ. Amen.