

Isaiah 25:6-9; John 11:32-44 All Saints Sunday
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Isaiah 24:6-9

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 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.

John 11:32-44

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.

*"Lord, If you had been here, my brother would not have died".
If you had been here....
If only you had been here...*

*If only the boy hadn't found that loaded gun
If only the policeman had been in uniform instead of plain clothes
If only the girl hadn't texted when she was driving...
If only the chemo had worked...
If only the transplant had come in time...
If only they had found the right anti-depressant*

*If only she could have quit drinking
If only they could have forgiven one another*

*God, if only you had been there, if only you had....
my neighbor, my child, my spouse, my sister, my friend would not have died.*

Mary's lament gives voice to the desperate feeling that comes with untimely death.

If only, if only...

If we live, if we love, there's no escaping the agony of loss, of grief. Even if it is a long-expected release from suffering, or the peaceful passing of an elder, the death of any beloved leaves a void that no one, nothing else can fill.

Every close relationship is unique. So, too, is every loss.

If we live, we die. If we love, we grieve.

On All Saints Day, the church universal honors those whom we love but see no longer. It honors those of us who mourn.

We read the names, praying aloud for people who have died in the past year. We hold others, some decades gone, in our hearts. We linger over photos. We visit graves or other special places. We remember.

"Jesus wept". The shortest sentence in the King James Bible, has to be the most consoling. There is no shame in grieving. Jesus wept, as we do.

In the early part of this gospel story, Jesus tells the disciples how it will unfold. He knows that through him God will raise his friend from the dead.

So why did Jesus weep? Was it for his friends--Mary and Martha? For their brother Lazarus? Did he weep for the human condition--the grief that is part of the deal? All of the above? We do not know.

Jesus wept. Then Jesus called Lazarus back to life.

This is last of the Jesus' seven miracles, or "signs", in the fourth gospel. It is the most astonishing. Mary and Martha had been sure that Jesus could heal Lazarus if only, if only he had come in time. This outcome had never occurred to them.

Nor could their friends have imagined how God would bring them into the miracle. The role of the community is a vital, implicit part of Lazarus' story. Jesus is God's agent. Jesus commands. But the community does the work with their own hands. They are the midwife for Lazarus' metaphorical rebirth. They who had come to mourn, instead roll back the stone. They open the tomb for Lazarus to emerge. They unbind him. They set him free.

They will welcome him back to a life transformed. Lazarus became a witness to the power of God in Jesus: he was living proof. Lazarus' community was transformed by the undeniable miracle that they had witnessed and facilitated together.

So it is with St. John's community. When we are entombed by care and sorrows, particularly grief of any kind, Jesus calls us back to life with and through one another. Some of you have done that for me. You rekindled life and hope, when I came holding the pieces of my broken heart. I am so grateful.

We can do that for one another when we show up--not like the perfectly-put-together people we see on Facebook, but as our authentic selves, with all of our own needs and flaws. We can bring the holy truth of hope and life by simply being present, listening with love.

One on one, or in small circles of trust--in study and conversation groups--we tell stories of sorrow and joy, the disappointments and the healing that have come in the process of loss. We listen in respectful silence to one another. We hold the space for the Holy Spirit to do her work of healing and transformation.

Eventually we may be led to share our own mystical experiences--the momentary glimpses we have gotten of life beyond this one, of the "more that is", about which my dear Claudia writes.

That "more" includes the mysterious presence of the great cloud of witnesses, the consolation of the communion of saints, blessing us from another dimension.

This church is a beautiful container for that mysterious presence--in the quiet grace of the columbarium and glowing through the memorial windows. Our handsome stone structure--tower and sanctuary--bears witness to the generations of faith practiced in this place and beckons people to come through the red doors to join us.

The raising of Lazarus was the prelude to Jesus' Resurrection. That would be the final proof of God's promise--the ages-old vision in Isaiah: God could and would "swallow up death forever", and wipe away the tears.

"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." What a consolation! What a vision! What a joyful promise! So, on this All Saints Sunday, joyfully, let us imagine all of the departed seated together at that feast, and saving a place for us!