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## Where we are going

*Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsobn given for the people of St. John's Episcopal Church  
All Saints, November 4, 2018; Revelation 21:1-6a, John 11:32-44*

During high school I lived outside Brussels, in Belgium, and went to an international school there. Maybe a third of the people in my school were American, but the rest were from all over the world: Spain, Ireland, Mlawi, Nigeria, China, Libya, Austria, Britain. These friends of mine and I would often take the train or the bus to downtown Brussels and hang out, go to the movies or because it was Europe to the bars too. And in Europe, everywhere you go, there are reminders of the hundreds and even thousands of years that go before us. The central square of Brussels is ringed by Gothic buildings from 500 years ago. Two miles from my house was the Lion of Waterloo, which commemorates battles from the time of Napoleon. We went to visit trenches from World War I in Ypres and a concentration camp in Belgium. We saw the giant stones of Stonehenge in England, from people millennia ago whose culture and world are lost to us.

When I came back to the U.S., one of the first things I noticed is that in this culture, we don't have much of a sense of time, of the people who came before us and who will go after us. We are mostly oriented toward right now. But even for us, in this country, there are times when we become aware of the flow of history, and it feels dangerous. In two days our country will vote on many different races in nearly all the branches of government, both local and national. It will be the first vote since Donald Trump took office, and we shall see how the country collectively weighs in. Given that the U.S. splits nearly perfectly into 50% republican and 50% democratic in most presidential elections recently, we can't say that most people agree with us, whoever the "us" is you most identify with. How will we treat the multiple caravans of refugees coming our way from Central America? What will we do with those already in our borders, including the thousands of children separated from their parents? How shall

we address the increasing violence against Jews and people of color and the LGBTQ community and the rising tide of white nationalism? Who is the “we” to which I am referring?

In the middle of this flow of history, we who are followers of the Way of Jesus have something priceless, which is a different narrative, to which we belong and in which we find ourselves. Our story offers an alternative picture of where we come from and where we are going. The beginning of our story, which we share with beloved Jewish brothers and sisters, is a garden in which every created thing is called good. And the end of our story, from today’s reading from Revelation, is the picture of a city. Our end, our purpose, is not people arising into heaven but God descending to earth and dwelling among us. The purpose toward which God directs our lives and our communities and all of history, is a community composed of people from every tribe and language and nation, who simply dwell with God. This is a God who wipes every tear from our eyes, and why can God do that? Because God suffers with us. God has been there. The God that both Hebrew scriptures and Jesus show us is the God who, like Jesus weeping for his friend Lazarus in today’s gospel lesson, suffers when there is injustice and grief and pain. Most of us were taught that God is sort of above and beyond suffering, because God is perfect and eternal and out there. But the God of our scriptures is one who hears the cry of the widow and the orphan in their distress. It’s the God revealed by Jesus who, as Pastor Nadia Bolz Weber says, thinks prostitutes are great dinner guests, because he considers them kin. And it’s the God in Christ who would not use violence to save himself, even at the cost of enormous suffering and torture and death.

The reading from Revelation shows us a picture of God’s dwelling with people, this apocalyptic vision of where God is moving all of the cosmos. Now Revelation has surely been inspiration for some of the world’s most fanatic and even violent people. It’s full of crazy images like dragons and scorpions and a woman crowned with the sun. But Revelation was probably written by John, exiled on the island Patmos, at a time when it was dangerous to be Jewish and dangerous to be a follower of the way of Jesus. And in this situation of danger, stories of hope and resistance and the power of God had to be written in code in order to survive. They had to be written in language and metaphors that would be obvious to the oppressed people, but would make no

sense to their oppressors. This is exactly what the book of Revelation is. In the middle of the extreme oppression and violence that characterized the first few centuries of life for Jesus followers, this crazy book comes, and it tells us where all of history is heading, in defiance to the the violence around them. It is moving toward the kingdom of God, which can be realized now, when God dwells with people, when violence and oppression and injustice and hunger are finished. This is what the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King saw when he said that the arc of history is long, but it bends toward justice.

Today is the Feast of All Saints. In it we are used to honoring our loved ones who have died. And that is right and good. But it is about more than our immediate families and friends. It is about the vast sweep of ordinary people like you and me across time who have followed the way of Jesus, who have sacrificed and opened themselves to the radical, unconditional love of God; the people who have been willing to walk differently than the culture around them, even to put themselves in harm's way, because they knew their primary identity was not in any country or race or social status or gender or political party either, but in Christ, in whom everyone is my sister, everyone is my brother. Now I know that Christians have done horrible things in the sweep of history. The Crusades and witchhunts and patriarchy and justification of slavery and Jim Crow and so many other wrongs. But Christians have also done beautiful, courageous things. We have opposed slavery and lifted up women and LGBTQ folks and served the hungry. There were villages in Europe, like Le Chambon-Sur-Lignon in France, that as a collective protected and hid Jews during World War II, and this village still welcomes and shelters refugees today. The Rt. Rev. Mariann Budde's entire Diocese, the Diocese of Washington D.C., has declared itself a sanctuary for refugees here in the U.S. These and many others are the people, the ordinary saints, to whom we are connected across space and time. They are the people who have prayed the ancient prayers we say every Sunday morning. They are the ones who have wrestled over and spoken the creeds. We are in a living flow of people caught up into the current of God's Spirit, the movement of God from a garden to the Beloved Community in which all belong.

And because we take that seriously, we can't settle for shallow or trite expressions of welcome and inclusion. All people are our family, which means that we stay in it with

people and cannot look the other way when harm is being done. We look for relationships over charity, because charity can become toxic. We forgive and seek forgiveness. We invite wholeness and healing in ourselves and in others. We are respectful and we set boundaries. We welcome the stranger and have compassion on the suffering. And sometimes, because the line between saint and sinner runs straight through each of our hearts and we are all capable of violence, we have enemies. But even our enemies are our kin, and that changes the conversation and the way we walk in the world.

So where do we come from? The garden of God's delight, in which we know that every created thing was called good. Where are we? It is true that we are part of this sweep of history, at this time in the life of our country and our world. And we are also part of the flow of God's Beloved Community, moving toward the City described in the reading from Revelation. Knowing where we come from and where we are going, let us take heart, and over and over again, in the small and the big things, do the right thing. To begin with, if you are age 18 or older, please vote on Tuesday or before it. But please do more than that. Please believe in the power of God, working in us, that can do abundantly far more than we can ask or imagine, so that we can have courage to enact the vision of the Beloved Community and not America First or any one group over others. Last Friday a number of us from St John's, and many others from Christian and Muslim and agnostic backgrounds, joined the Jewish folks at Shir Tikvah for a service of Shabbat, in which we gathered as one people to mourn the anti-semitism and racism in our country and protest it by affirming the presence of God with us, with singing and solidarity and joy in the midst of our grief. Let us live in that solidarity, in the Beloved Community that God is already creating, because that is who we are and where we belong.