

All Saints Day, Year B – November 1, 2015
Isaiah 25:6-9; Psalm 24; Revelation 21:1-6a; John 11:32-44
By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean

Today we celebrate All Saints—all those designated as saints by the Church as well as others lesser known. Of course, the New Testament uses the word “saints” to describe the entire membership of the community of faith, living and departed. Today our gospel tells a story involving Lazarus and his sisters Martha and Mary who lived a couple of miles outside Jerusalem in the town of Bethany. They were close friends of Jesus and he stopped by often. When he made his entrance into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, it was from Bethany that Jesus set out, and he even returned for a few days just prior to his final arrest. The final of seven miraculous signs through which John’s gospel reveals the person and purpose of Jesus takes place there in Bethany, and that is what we hear today.

The wisdom of many religious traditions including our own speaks of our lives as lived for the purpose of preparing us for our death. The loss of my father at an early age – never seeing him again after the age of eight - became for me an early dress rehearsal for facing other losses, small and large (in my personal and parish life), which, in turn, provide rehearsals, as it were, preparing me for the facing of my own death. At this point in my life, again I can say with all the ambivalence of Woody Allen that I’m not afraid to die—I just don’t want to be there when it happens. Certainly such an appreciation—albeit, an ambivalent one—of others’ and eventually our own mortality, has us live our lives more intentionally and less obliviously. And at the same time—and this is part of the almost necessary ambivalence—as the writer Albert Camus portrays in his work, The Myth of Sisyphus, we should reject death and its absurd imminence to the degree that we live life to the fullest until the day we die.ⁱ

Now, when Lazarus died, Jesus didn't arrive in Bethany until several days afterwards—four days to be precise. By including a detail like this in the narrative, the gospel writer underscores the unnatural, miraculous nature of Jesus raising Lazarus. According to the rabbinical tradition, a person's life-breath was thought to hover near the body for three days, after which death was pronounced with certainty. The fact that Jesus raised Lazarus after four days made his claim “I am the resurrection and the life” all the more irrefutable and his act of raising Lazarus, who was dead as a doornail, all the more astoundingly real. This couldn't be faked. This was really an act of God, through Jesus who was so alive with the Holy Spirit, the giver of life, that he couldn't help but bring to life his close friend. In doing so he revealed just how present and near God's power and love were, and how such life giving possibilities couldn't be contained or controlled by any religious or imperial authority.

When Jesus first arrived, he found Lazarus’ sisters Martha and Mary still in shock and grief, so much so that first they reproach him for not having come in time to save their brother. Then, they tell him they know he could save him still. Lazarus’ passing, it seems, was one in which something had gone terribly wrong.ⁱⁱ A “tragic” death, a death that came too soon to somebody too young, visited on unsuspecting family and friends who didn’t

think such a thing could or would happen to them – as Jesus’ own death would be. And so Martha and Mary each cry out to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” That Lazarus’ death was a wrenching, premature and inconsolable death can be deduced by that word “if” that circulated among the bereaved family and friends. “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” (11:21, 32). The “ifs” of Martha and Mary cannot be suppressed. Who of us has not shared in something like that same numbed anger, the haunting “if” that these sisters make known to Jesus? “If she had just had her seat belt on...” “If he’d only taken a later flight that day....” And who of us, like Jesus, has not turned to tears as a source of a deep sighing prayer for, or catharsis from, an unspeakable pain. So although at the beginning of this story Jesus seems to be rather nonchalant about Lazarus’ illness and seemingly sudden or quick death; as he finally arrives and sees and hears the grief and pain of their loss, he himself - the Lord of Life - breaks down and cries.ⁱⁱⁱ

The problem of pain, tragedy and evil—why bad things happen to good people—is perhaps the greatest single problem for religious faith. There have been numerous theological and philosophical attempts to solve it, but when it comes down to the reality of experiencing evil acts or tragic events, none of these answers or theories are worth much. For example, when a child is beaten and murdered, most of us are not apt to take much comfort from even the explanation, which is somewhat better than most, that, since God wants humanity to love God and one another, and since love requires freedom to be truly love, human beings must be free to love or not to love, and thus free even to beat and murder another human being if they take a notion to.

Other popular points of view attempt to “solve” the problem of why bad things happen to good people, by asserting that evil and pain do not exist except as an illusion of our mortal minds. Or, some solve it in terms of a belief in a kind of law of cause and effect whereby the victim is merely reaping the consequences of evil deeds committed in this or a previous life. Or, we hear the vague, and at times truly insensitive and erroneous lines such as “God is just testing you,” or “It’s God’s will”—even if the person saying this is just trying to make some sense of it and doesn’t even believe what they are saying.

In contrast to all these perspectives, as followers of Christ, ultimately we can offer no theoretical solution at all. We can only point to the Word who became flesh, and who lived among us, and to his cross, and say that, practically speaking, there is no pain or tragedy or evil so terrible or obscene but that God can turn it to good, if not right away in our time, then at some time, in God’s time, and that God will at least be with us *in* the tragedy.^{iv}

The one who raised Lazarus from the dead, the one who himself is raised from the dead, the one who raises us from the dead, is the same one without whom we would not have life to begin with. In our gospel we have a vision of a God who cares as much about us now during our brief lives as God cares after we die. Jesus’ statement “I am the Resurrection and the life” (John 11:25) is stated in the present tense. In fact, as Jesus relates to each person in this story in different ways—as teacher, friend, fellow mourner, as the power of resurrection itself—in each way he enables transformation to occur in the here and now. For example, in the early part of this story, the disciples are fearful at first

to re-enter the dangerous territory of Bethany, yet in their relationship with Jesus their fear is transformed into remarkable courage, summed up by the disciple Thomas who says, “Let us also go that we may die with him.” The sisters who first encounter Jesus with a mixture of grief, confusion and anger, through their relationship with Jesus find themselves coming to a faith and hope that he is making all things right. In and through relationship with Jesus and one another, people find real transformation right there in the midst of tragic moments. Jesus who is the resurrection and the life doesn't just make that reality apparent in the afterlife, but rather in the midst of living and life itself.

Now, calling on the “communion of saints” or “cloud of witnesses;” connecting with “all the company of heaven,”—all the faithful and not-so-faithful departed—means being connected with all those who are still with us, *and* all those whom we have ever loved and lost and see no longer—and even those we never knew well or never even heard of, but upon whose shoulders we somehow stand. This connection is real and powerful. This awareness of being part of “all the company of heaven” “makes our hearts as wide as the world” in the words of Henri Nouwen.^v For the love with which we love is not just our own individual capacity to love, it is also the love of Jesus and all the departed living in us. When the Spirit of Jesus lives in our hearts, all who have lived their lives in that Spirit live there, too—even the less- or non-believing departed. Our parents, grandparents and great-grandparents, our teachers and their teachers, our spiritual guides and their spiritual guides; even our less than positive role models. They are all part of our hearts, part of who we are. They inspire us, guide us, encourage us, warn us, and give us hope; and we can call on this eternal *cheering section* urging us onward. So then, our Commemoration of All Saints is not just a mere remembrance of those who have gone before us. Rather, it is a celebration of a living community in our hearts, a very real presence.

So, sure, this gospel story is about loss and preparation for further and possibly greater losses. And yes, this story is about cherishing all the more the people who are around after a loss. And this story is a reminder of, and rehearsal for, Jesus’ death and resurrection, *and* our own deaths (and eventual resurrections). But more than all these, this story is a rehearsal for our lives lived now, for our living fully with and through loss. The greatest tragedy is not death itself, but what dies in us while we are still alive. Because this whole story and Jesus’ actions and the various transformations and his statement “I am the Resurrection and the life” all occur in the present tense, this story is about how life can be lived here and now, in the resolute hope and faith and love of God’s presence and purpose. Of course, when we don’t live this out very well, it can become a point of reflection. We act; we reflect, we act some more. Life, in fact, is not a dress rehearsal for the future as much as it is simply showing up now (like Jesus); being present; being and acting and reflecting in the actual play of life itself, in the present moment, which is the *only* moment we are truly alive.^{vi} And we are by no means alone in all this in this moment, and that is what this day reminds us of. For what we call “the communion of saints” or “all the company of heaven” or “the cloud of witnesses” are all the faithful, and not so faithful departed who *live in us*. We are often made to believe that everything that we think, say or do has to be our personal accomplishment. But as people who belong to a larger family of the living and the dead, we know in our hearts that anything of spiritual or lasting value is not just the result of our individual accomplishment, but the fruit of a life

shared with others. Again, we stand on the shoulders of many others, living and departed.

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So, whatever other reasons we have for coming here today, if we have come also to give each other our love and to give God our love, then together with the Angels and Archangels, with Jesus and his disciples and all the saints—and with all those whom we love but see no longer, and all those still present in our lives—we are “the communion of saints.”

ⁱ See Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus and other essays (New York: Vintage Books, 1991 edition). This gospel story was also placed as far back as the third century church, in the Sunday readings for the Sunday that falls two weeks before Easter. The raising of Lazarus, in fact, becomes the threshold or pivotal event leading to the whole Jerusalem showdown of Jesus’ arrest, trial, execution, and resurrection. The other three gospels put Jesus’ cleansing of the temple as the pivotal point of their accounts leading to Christ’s passion and death. John’s resurrection story of Lazarus has all the makings of a dress rehearsal for Jesus’ own story and, indeed, leads to it. This scene has a cave and a stone covering, and discarded linens lying on the ground. When read on the Fifth Sunday in Lent, this story invites us to approach the events of Holy Week with a sense of both déjà vu and irony. For as Jesus is proclaimed as the Lord and giver of life, yet the very act of raising his friend Lazarus to life proves to enflame others and becomes the catalyst that sets in motion the events that lead to his own death on a cross. In order for Lazarus to live or rather be brought back to life, Jesus must return to Bethany which was becoming more and more dangerous. Earlier there, in fact, Jesus was almost stoned to death by an angry mob. This and the events that follow, have Jesus exchanging his life for the life of his friend Lazarus, thus doing no less that Jesus taught his disciples to do. Hearing this story two weeks before Easter was done because for the early Church the resurrection was such an amazing, unbelievable thing that they had to work up to it, so to speak.

After all, the mindblowing concept of a resurrected afterlife is entirely unnatural. To paraphrase Frederick Buechner, humankind does not go on living beyond the grave, because that is simply how we are made (Frederick Buechner, Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC (London: Collins, 1973), pp. 42-43). As our body and soul are part and parcel of each other as the sticks and flame that make up a fire, when we die we die one hundred per cent. We are dust and to dust we shall return. And so we go to the grave as dead as doornails, but are given life back again by God in resurrection, just as we were given it in the first place, because that is the way God is made, so to speak. So, rather than the notion of an indomitable or invincible human spirit that marches on after death in a continuous and natural progression from life to immortal life, our Scripture instead speaks of resurrection which is based on God’s eternal and steadfast Love and Power once the human body/spirit is no longer – an entirely unnatural event, an act of God.

ⁱⁱ The death of Lazarus from what this story conveys, was not the kind we would call a good death such as the death that comes mercifully after a long life or after a prolonged debilitating illness, the kind we could call a healing death or a merciful release for one who has become just too tired and too sick or worn out to go any further. Just the opposite of that kind of death.

ⁱⁱⁱ We, too, are shaken oftentimes. Let’s step back for a minute and ask what we know about the problem of pain and suffering. As Buechner puts it, as people of faith, we know three things: 1) God is all-powerful; 2) God is all good; and 3) Terrible things happen (Buechner, *Ibid.*, p. 24). Now we can reconcile any two of these propositions with each other, but we cannot reconcile all three.

^{iv} When Jesus wept over the dead body of his friend Lazarus, many things were probably at work in him, and likely there were many levels to his grief. Again, Frederick Buechner captures some of these levels in this scene which begins with the basic fact of Jesus weeping because his friend was dead and he had loved him. Beneath that, Buechner suggests, Jesus wept because as Martha then Mary each reminded him, if he had only been present, Lazarus needn’t have died, and he was not present at least not in the way and to the extent that he was needed. Buechner then adds, “Beneath even that, it is as if his grief goes so deep

that it is for the whole world that Jesus is weeping and for the tragedy of the human condition, which is to live in a world where again and again God is not present, at least not in the way and to the degree that humanity needs God. Jesus sheds his tears at the visible absence of God in the world, where the good and bad alike go down to defeat and death...He is disturbed in spirit and deeply moved to tears at the blindness of human beings which prevents even Jesus himself a few days later, from seeing God to the extent that at the moment of all moments when he needs God most - on the cross - he cries out his "My God, my God why have you forsaken me," which is a cry so deep and dark that of the four Gospel writers, only two of them had the stomach to record it as the last words he spoke before he died. Jesus wept, we all weep, because even when humanity is good, even when that human is Jesus, God, it seems, makes himself [herself] scarce for reasons that no theological or philosophical explanations can really fathom" (Frederick Buechner, Listening to Your Life (HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), p. 106).

There is, in this story, one other way Jesus experienced and expressed strong emotions—perhaps at the deepest level—namely out of his anger at the presumed power of death with which he, as the "resurrection and the life" was about to do battle, first at Lazarus' tomb and soon thereafter on his own cross and three days in a tomb. This anger calls forth a courageous facing-into the abyss of death. That is the essence of Jesus as the bearer of hope; for hope is believing in spite of the evidence and then resolutely acting to change the evidence. Hope is the God-part that is still there in us even when our worst fears have been realized. With the death of Lazarus – and soon his own death - a number of peoples' including Jesus' own worst fears were being realized. Yet given that it is God who hopes in us, that hope is sure and powerful. And so here Jesus faces right into the hopelessness of his friend's tomb and with a loud voice of anger and courage he calls Lazarus forth from the tomb. As St. Augustine later said, "Hope has two lovely daughters, anger and courage; anger so that what cannot be, may not be; and courage, so that what must be, will be" (Quoted in Robert McAfee Brown, Spirituality and Liberation: Overcoming the Great Fallacy, (Louisville, KY: Westminster Press, 1988), p. 136). And this reminds of us an earlier statement by Jesus in John's gospel, "the hour is coming when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live...all who are in their graves will hear his voice and will come out..." (5:25, 28-29a). In the depths of being greatly disturbed to tears, Jesus, rather than being immobilized in his distress, instead resolutely bears the suffering of Lazarus' death on himself while turning it to good. He goes to where his friend's body lay and brings him back to life again.

^v Henri Nouwen, Bread for the Journey (HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), pp. Nov. 13-14

^{vi} Having had brushes with death, as it were, Chinese dissident artist, Ai Weiwei, adds: "I think right now is the moment...We don't know what is it the moment of...But really, we see the sunshine coming in...Our whole condition was very sad, but we still feel warmth, and the life in our bodies can still tell us that there is excitement in there, even though death is waiting. We had better not enjoy the moment, but create the moment" (Quoted in Ai Weiwei, Weiwei-isms (Princeton University Press, 2013), p. 83).

^{vii} For those who question the fact that we stand on many other's shoulders, as it were, listen to David Brooks' take on this in a piece he wrote called "The Credit Illusion" (in *The New York Times*, August 2, 2012):

"Over the past few years, I've built a successful business. I've worked hard, and I'm proud of what I've done. But now President Obama tells me that social and political forces helped build that. Mitt Romney went to Israel and said cultural forces explain the differences in the wealth of nations. I'm confused. How much of my success is me, and how much of my success comes from forces outside of me?"
- Confused in Columbus.

Dear Confused,

This is an excellent question. It has no definitive answer. There were many different chefs of the stew that is you: parents, friends, teachers, ancestors, mentors and, of course, Oprah Winfrey. It's very hard to know how much of your success is owed to those people and how much is owed to yourself. As a wise man once said, what God hath woven together, even multiple regression analysis cannot tear asunder.

Nonetheless, this question does have a practical and a moral answer. It is this: You should regard yourself as the sole author of all your future achievements and as the grateful beneficiary of all your past successes.

As you go through life, you should pass through different phases in thinking about how much credit you deserve. You should start your life with the illusion that you are completely in control of what you do. You should finish life with the recognition that, all in all, you got better than you deserved.

In your 20s, for example, you should regard yourself as an Ayn Randian Superman who is the architect of the wonder that is you. This is the last time in your life that you will find yourself truly fascinating, so you might as well take advantage of it. You should imagine that you have the power to totally transform yourself, to go from the pathetic characters on “Girls” to the awesome and confident persona of someone like Jay-Z.

This sense of possibility will unleash feverish energies that will propel you forward. You’ll be one of those people who joined every club in high school, started a side business while in college and spent the years after graduation bravely doing entrepreneurial social work across the developing world.

This may not make you sympathetic when it comes to other people’s failures (as everybody’s Twitter feed can attest), but it will give you liftoff velocity in the race of life.

In your 30s and 40s, you will begin to think like a political scientist. You’ll have a lower estimation of your own power and a greater estimation of the power of the institutions you happen to be in.

You’ll still have faith in your own skills, but it will be more the skills of navigation, not creation. You’ll adapt to the rules and peculiarities of your environment. You’ll keep up with what the essayist Joseph Epstein calls “the current snobberies.” You’ll understand that the crucial question isn’t what you want, but what the market wants. For a brief period, you won’t mind breakfast meetings.

Then in your 50s and 60s, you will become a sociologist, understanding that relationships are more powerful than individuals. The higher up a person gets, the more time that person devotes to scheduling and personnel. As a manager, you will find yourself in the coaching phase of life, enjoying the dreams of your underlings. Ambition, like promiscuity, is most pleasant when experienced vicariously.

You’ll find yourself thinking back to your own mentors, newly aware of how much they shaped your path. Even though the emotions of middle-aged people are kind of ridiculous, you’ll get sentimental about the relationships you benefited from and the ones you are building. Steve Jobs said his greatest accomplishment was building a company, not a product.

Then in your 70s and 80s, you’ll be like an ancient historian. Your mind will bob over the decades and then back over the centuries, and you’ll realize how deeply you were formed by the ancient traditions of your people — being Mormon or Jewish or black or Hispanic. You’ll appreciate how much power the dead have over the living, since this will one day be your only power. You’ll be struck by the astonishing importance of luck — the fact that you took this bus and not another, met this person and not another.

In short, as maturity develops and the perspectives widen, the smaller the power of the individual appears, and the greater the power of those forces flowing through the individual.

But you, Mr. Confused in Columbus, are right to preserve your pride in your accomplishments. Great companies, charities and nations were built by groups of individuals who each vastly overestimated their own autonomy. As an ambitious executive, it’s important that you believe that you will deserve credit for everything you achieve. As a human being, it’s important for you to know that’s nonsense.”