

1 November, 2009
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Wisdom of Solomon 3:1-9
Psalms 25

Revelation 21:1-6a
The Gospel of John 11:32-44

Greetings on this Feast of All Saints! It is an amazing thing to celebrate *all* the saints. But I think it's interesting how different ideas of who that is we sometimes have.

This last week the comic strip, Non Sequitur I think, spoke to this and I wish that I did have something that I could show this to you if you didn't see it. But I'll try as best I can to describe it. There is an enormous arch that says: 'Welcome to Heaven'. And there is a gate—two gates in fact, and a fence. And of these two gates there is a sign pointing to the one on the left that says, 'Wrong Religion Entrance'. And on the right there is a sign pointing to the other that says, 'Right Religion Entrance'.

Two angels are standing off to the side, talking in front of the left hand entrance, the 'Wrong Religion Entrance'; there is no one. In front of the 'Right Religion Entrance' there is a huge line backed up. The two angels are talking [and] one says to the other, "*The funny thing is none of them ever get the joke.*"

So let's assume that it's not about getting it right. It's not about getting it right. You don't have to keep shopping and shopping and shopping for the church that has everything just perfectly right. God in that divine mercy looks down, clucks the tongue a few times—tsk, tsk, tsk, tsk—and says, "Grace be with you."

But here we are celebrating all the saints, the communion of saints, and I have to wonder: If it's not just getting it right, what is that all about?

And we listen to the Old Testament reading from the Book of Wisdom in the Apocrypha and then the Revelation to John. Both of those are talking about hope in death, about the difficulties of life and about how God is with us in those and is showing us the way through that.

Last night's celebrations and today are a real package. I think it's sad that so many Christians are afraid of All Hallows Eve and try to clean it up and call it a Harvest Festival or other folks who, you know, let the kids dress up as fairy princesses or fireman or any number of cute little things.

In the pre-Christian Celtic world this period Samhain was about facing our deepest terrors. *The sun is dying yet again this year! The sun is dying! It's the end! And the veil between the seen and unseen world is getting thinner and thinner and our deepest fears from the other side are coming through. Uncle Billy is possibly coming back! And we know what that means.* Well, it's still true.

That whole business of dressing up as our deepest fears is a very good psycho-spiritual exercise for us to engage in. If it's werewolves or ghouls or Mr. Madoff or whoever it is that we are terrified of, it's good to dress up and to dance with our terror. To give it candy at the door. And to let it be faced so that *it loses its power over us*.

As long as we keep it outside in the shadows we're going to be terrified of it. By never facing our fears, they stay inside and leak out sideways in all sorts of control behavior and iron-fisted self-righteousness that comes out of terror. We need to face our fears. And if it's only once a year, let it be. Get scared.

And then realize that werewolf on the front porch is a fourth grader from Northlake.

It seems to me anyway that the Gospel for today—it seems at first blush like such an odd reading for All Saints Day. The raising of Lazarus. But following festivities with all manner of ghouls and ghosties and long-legged beasts and things that go bump in the night—Good Lord deliver us!—to have Jesus waiting around until his friend Lazarus was good and dead before he would come to arrive in the midst of wailing and keening and weeping—these are not Episcopalians at a funeral. These people know how to grieve. They weep and if there's not enough people around to do it justice they hire extras.

And Jesus walks right into that. He embraces it. He sobs and weeps right along with them. He asks them to take him to the grave. And not just sort of 'stand off at a comfortable distance' but 'roll away the stone. Let's all smell what a four day old corpse smells like.' He walked right into our deepest fears of death and loss. And he says, "Watch this! You've been thinking that death and loss have the final word. Death and loss do not have the final word; *God* has the final word."

And so he shows the glory of God which is beyond our worst fears and which shows us that the things that we are most terrified of ultimately do not have power. It's like those monsters on the front stoop. He danced with grief and death and showed how they do not have power.

I was struck some years ago, burying someone who had died from cancer and having read so many obituaries about people finally losing the battle to cancer after a courageous struggle and it occurred to me that the cancer died with the body and he lived on. Who won? Death does not have the ultimate power.

When we are able to step into that place, that transformed heart and mind that Jesus calls us into there is absolutely nothing that we need fear. We can actually understand that angelic greeting, 'Fear not. Fear not. We who are called the saints of God...'

Folks just like you and me, as the old hymn goes, we are called into this place of courage and that is why it occurs to me that the language of the hymns chosen for All Saints Day so often have a martial tone to them. They sound a bit warlike but it's about

the kind of warrior mentality, of that bravery, to face whatever life may throw at us knowing that it cannot win. It cannot overcome that ultimate presence of God.

What we are then called to is to live a life that is reflective of the knowledge. Not knowledge [indicating head]; *knowledge* [indicating heart]. Not knowledge in our heads, the interior knowledge between our ears, but in our hearts and in our minds. That sense of fearlessness that comes knowing that the world's best shots cannot win.

So how do we live with that knowledge? Do we stay clamped down? Do we stay fearful? Does the Nightly Business Report send terror through us? Are we terrified every time we go to the doctor that maybe it will be *this time* that I get *the news*? Are we afraid of our neighbors? Are we afraid of those different from us? Are we afraid of everybody in the world so that we stand armed to the teeth talking peace?

How do we live with courage knowing that we cannot be defeated? How do we live that out? There's every message coming at us that we should be fearful. Think of those alarm system commercials on the television. We're inundated with this kind of a message. You're fat. And you're getting old. But we have something that can fix that for you. (You're laughing.) We buy into it. How many billion dollars is it—I think I heard it's 44 billion dollars a year we spend on ways to not get fat and our obesity rate is skyrocketing.

We're afraid. We're terrified. And Jesus says to fear not. Nothing can defeat us. If we really and truly follow Christ, we would walk straight into the things that terrify us the most. We would live on the edge of our fear looking it in the eye and seeing it's the fourth grader from Northlake, seeing that it has no way to ultimately defeat us.

Today is not only All Saints Day but it's the ingathering for our stewardship appeal. And so my appeal to you is to live on the edge, to be brave, to not be intimidated by the Nightly Business Report or the Wall Street Journal or any of the things that make us hold on and clamp down just in case.

The last words of the Gospel reading today are directed at those standing around the tomb of Lazarus. He says to them as Lazarus rises from the tomb: "Unbind him, and let him go." I offer that to all of us:

May we be unbound by our fears. May we step forward courageously, defiantly, and symbolically, with the stroke of a pen, show our courage. The courage that we know in our hearts that nothing, nothing—nothing!—can defeat us in our life in God through Christ.

Amen.