

ALL SAINT'S DAY, 2024

I don't know about you, but I have found that my emotions are close to the surface recently. I can be moved to tears by a greeting card while standing in the aisle at Target or by a sentimental commercial on TV. Between the tensions of our upcoming national election and all of the deaths and illnesses with which we have been dealing as a faith community lately, many of us may find that emotions run high and tears come easily. This morning's moving service may be yet another circumstance that may cause us to weep. Is that a problem? Not at all. It's as it should be. Where better to cry than in church? In fact, our Scripture lessons this morning are full of emotions and tears, aren't they? In our Gospel lesson, Lazarus, the friend of Jesus and brother to Mary and Martha of Bethany, has died. His sisters weep; the community weeps; even Jesus weeps. Which reveals that grief is not only human, but divine. Just like us, those in that lesson ache with the sorrow of loss and express it in tears, but God in Christ weeps alongside them *and* us. Tears are mentioned in our first lesson, from Revelation, also, but here there's a different angle: we are told that in the new heaven and new earth; in the realm beyond this realm; God will wipe away our tears and there will be no more cause for mourning, for crying, for anguish. Both the reality of tears in this realm and the wiping away of tears in the next realm, are expressed and acknowledged in our texts and our rituals this day. We grieve; but we do not grieve alone. God and our community grieve alongside us. We weep; but we do not despair. Because we trust that our tears and sorrow will one day be eased in the comfort and hope of resurrected life.

This morning there are four names on our list of those whose funerals or memorial services happened within this church or were performed by me as a representative of this church: DeWayne Rubedor, Audrey Carlson, Paul Struve, and George Krog. We here today knew these four to varying degrees, but they were absolutely dear to their families and friends, and their absence is a source of pain. Each of them was a child of God, sustained by God's Spirit, and we miss the unique and particular spark of light they brought into our lives. Additionally, each one of us comes with our *own* list of losses for this past year—my list includes my father-in-law, Burt Berge. You have *your own* lists, too, and these loved ones may be remembered with the lighting of a candle later in our service, as a reminder that their spark of light continues in the realm of eternity. The words

and rites of this All Saint's Sunday invite us to think big, to think outside the box, to imagine what we cannot imagine. I found these lovely words from Bishop Steve Charleston, an Episcopalian priest of Native American background, to be helpful in that task of bridging the gap between now and eternity. He writes:

"How thin the walls between earth and heaven. How close the space between us. A blink. A look away. In an instant the gap is closed, the two realities flowing together like rivers passing in the moonlight. If you are still enough in your soul you can hear the footsteps of your ancestors just a breath away. We are not isolated in a mechanical clock universe for no rhyme or reason, but fellow citizens of a creation alive with purpose, animated by love, drawing time forward to disappear in a timeless grace. On a clear day you can see the angels flying." I especially love the phrase "a timeless grace" as a way to describe eternity with God. Our lessons celebrate this "timeless grace" to come, and yet we continue in *this* age and time to struggle with loss and sorrow, with beginnings and endings. We might even say that the passage of time that carries us along with it seems to be comprised primarily of beginnings and endings. Beginnings lead to endings. And yet endings beget new beginnings. Beginnings and endings are inextricably a part of our lives and are intertwined with one another. Which is why it so heartening to hear Jesus say in our lesson from Revelation, "*I am the beginning and the end.*" All beginnings, all endings, all new beginnings, are in God's hands.

The importance of not only beginnings, but endings, becomes clearer to me as I age. Our bodies simply wear out. That could be said for the four souls on our All Saint's list this year: their bodies had just worn out and were done. There was no clear way forward in this life; the only way forward was to be made altogether new, to begin anew. At some level, realistically speaking, our cells begin to die from birth onward; mortality is programmed within our DNA. We will die. On this earth and within our lifespan, the time comes when we can no longer *be* made new. The only way we can be made new at that point is through resurrected life, through entrance into eternity. New heaven. New earth. New creation. New us. But what makes that new beginning possible is the ending of life in this realm. Of course, we fear death and dying and the unknown, but death is how the chapter of this life in this world comes to end for us; it is a necessary closure. Without it, the next chapter can't begin. Which doesn't mean that we don't grieve our own inevitable death or the death of those we

love; we do. We should! The goodness of this life is worth grieving when it ends. But maybe it helps us to recognize that death is a part of life, a means of ending one chapter in order to begin a new chapter. Both endings and beginnings are in God's loving hands. And throughout our beginnings and endings and new beginnings, throughout our life and death and resurrection, *God speaks our name, and we are not alone.*

Consider our Gospel text with that dramatic raising of Lazarus from his tomb. Lazarus was part of a set of three siblings, along with Mary and Martha, who seem to have been particularly close friends of Jesus. His death leaves his sisters heart-broken, and Jesus is also deeply moved to tears by grief when he arrives. Certainly, God knows and understands our tears. But in the face of his grief and the sorrow of all present; in the face of all that was known about the finality of death up to that point; Christ pushes back. He goes with the sisters and other mourners to the tomb. A tomb occupied for three days by a dead body, which therefore, as practical Martha points out, will have a stench. When any of us stand at the tomb or grave or a loved one, we come face to face with the reality of death, and we can feel weak, vulnerable, frightened. But Jesus acts boldly in the face of all of this; the tomb is opened and he calls loudly, "Lazarus, come out!" And Lazarus does. Even dead ears hear the voice of Christ and respond. As one commentator wrote, "What we need to hear is that on both sides of the grave there is life for us because Jesus has been sent to call our names." Isn't that profound? "On both sides of the grave there is life for us because Jesus has been sent to call our names." Your name has been called so many times by God---in your birth, your baptism, your life of faith, your joys and sorrows, in times of need and times of abundance, God has named you again and again. It's no different after death; Christ calls our names then also, and there *is new life*. The common factor between life and death and resurrection is the grace of God and the calling of our names. God is powerfully present with us on either side of the grave. Or as Lyle Northey once told me, "I know that God owns the real estate on both sides of the river." That river is the River Jordan, perhaps, metaphorically that boundary between life and death, the grave and resurrection. God owns the real estate on both sides of the river.

All of this we claim in our faith, trusting in God's grace. But that doesn't mean life or death are easy. I think that all of us struggle with doubt at times when we think about endings and beginnings, about death and

resurrection. We wouldn't be honest, thinking human beings if we didn't. But, one of the ways we might think about this, when doubts assail us, is to consider the nature of our God. Again and again, Scripture proclaims that God makes all things new, even us. That's what our lesson from Revelation proclaims. There comes a time when the only venue for that to happen is in eternity, in a new beginning, in a resurrected life. So, is our God the God who makes all things new, the God of beginnings? Or not? If we answer "yes" to that question, if we take God at God's word, then there is a beginning after the ending; a new heaven, a new earth, a new creation, and a new us. We catch glimpses of that new beginning in our lesson from Revelation as John of Patmos describes a realm without grief, but only joy. We catch a glimpse of it when Jesus raises Lazarus in our Gospel lesson, a foreshadowing of his own resurrection---and of ours. We catch glimpses of this new creation even in our present creation. Now, we see nature dying around us. There can be a melancholy underside to this transition from the rich colors of October into the bare branches of November. But, we know that there is literally nothing on earth that can stop spring from coming around yet again. Even to the North Shore of Lake Superior in Minnesota. It may be delayed; it may be muddy; it may be brief; but spring *will* come. New life is *always* God's final word. Beginnings *always* come out of endings. And God holds both endings and beginnings in God's hands. "I am the Alpha and the Omega; the Beginning and the End" says Christ. And we are promised by God in this lesson, "See, I am making all things new." Even us. Amen.