

Today is the Sunday of the church calendar set aside each year to remember the saints. “In the Lutheran tradition saints aren’t a special category of people who happen to be the opposite of sinners, in the Lutheran tradition saints are just regular sinners who happen to be forgiven.” So we call this Sunday, not *Some* saints, but *All* Saints. (Bolz Weber - Seeing How the Story Works Out)

Yes, today we remember those who have died, whether recently or from ages past. It is the day we have set aside as the church to “honor our dead... honor our grief; [and] to celebrate their memories.” In that way, our little display here reflects what the day is. We center those who have died. This wrought iron candle station, a place to light a candle and pray by its light, lives every other day of the year here at Calvary just there. But today, it’s front and center. Today we use it to hold open a space to remember the death of those who hold space in us.

We get help this time of year with this centering of the dead - Halloween was Monday after all. Katherine May, in her book *Wintering* (2020) writes, In Halloween we see echoes of the Gaelic pagan festival of Samhain, which marked the arrival of the dark half of the year... [It] was considered to be a moment when the veil between this world and the other world was at its thinnest...

But, she goes on,

Our contemporary Western celebrations [including Halloween] forget the dead altogether, or at least remove them from any association with grief and loss. They offer no comfort to those who mourn. We are, after all, a society that has done all it can to erase death, to pursue youth to the bitter end, and to sideline the elderly and infirm... Today's Halloween simply reflects what we secretly think - that death is a surrender to decay that makes us monsters. -*Wintering* 56-57

But today the Church remembers her dead, our saints in light. And, in a veiled way, we consider our own deaths. And of course, centering death in our gaze, even for a day, brings heartache, angst, perhaps yearning for our loved one(s), regret, and sometimes feelings too complicated to describe.

We hear some of this in our Psalm for today. As though making a case for their deserving, the psalmist writes, "My footsteps hold fast to your well-worn path; and my feet do not slip." Then the request, "I call upon you... wondrously show your steadfast love..." Guard me, keep me, hide me from all of these feelings! All the angst and pain that surface when we turn toward death can be heard in the pleading tone of these words.

But our readings today carry too a measure of comfort. The first letter of Paul to the community in Thessalonica addressed their angst at the death of members who had died without having witnessed Jesus' "coming again." He urges the believers not to grieve "as others do who have no hope." He tells them that the dead in Christ are not forgotten.

This second letter to the Thessalonians continues that encouragement, where Paul says don't be "quickly shaken in mind or alarmed..." for we will be gathered together to him when he comes again. Naming these believers "beloved by the Lord" and "the first fruits for salvation", he is exhorting the Thessalonians to stand firm and hold fast to the faith - "eternal comfort and good hope," he assures them, have already been given.

From Job we hear a more full-throated declaration of confidence in the face of the death and the grief he knew: "For I know that my redeemer lives" (25-27). Even as there is a lot more of this book to go, Job here articulates confidence in the power and faithfulness of God, and God's mercy.

In our gospel lesson we hear Jesus' response to a challenge by some Temple officials trying to trap him in a question regarding the law and the afterlife - "which of these brothers will be the husband of this childless woman?"

It's a question about the resurrection. And Jesus answered it deftly. He draws the line between this age, in which people are married or given in marriage, and that age - the age of resurrection - in which there is no death and so no need for marriage. My thoughts, though, wander back to this childless woman.

She had seven husbands and was widowed by each. With each new husband and the brothers that remained, she likely helped each to grieve the loss they were experiencing in the wake of death. She likely helped each of her husbands to die, walking with them and caring for them as they declined. And childless - had there been pregnancy, had there been complications, had there been children that did not live beyond birth? Whether there had been or not, this woman knew the ordeal of death and its grief.

While she may not have existed, a hypothetical "woman" drawn up to stump Jesus, I don't see Jesus hearing her story and discounting her grief and loss. He does get into it concerning resurrection, but he makes a turn toward the end that seems for me to speak to this woman: God is not "God of the dead, but of the living; for to God all of them are alive." All those brothers, all those children, none are forgotten.

Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber said something like this differently in a sermon she preached this week at a women's prison in Colorado. She writes,

I am no expert in the afterlife, but all I know is that when we die, we somehow return to our divine source. And because God is love, the love we shared here on Earth is the connective tissue that unites us eternally with everyone who loved us. In some inexplicable way, we are all - every single one of us - held together in the heart of God.

This is not meant to gloss over the reality of the relationships we have in life. They can be complex, layered and painful, especially in the experience of grief. “Some grief is more complicated than others.” “It’s difficult to grieve a parent you loved but who was also a terrible mother. And it’s difficult to grieve someone [for whom] we still carry guilt over not treating [them] as well as we could have.”

I say it again: The saints we remember today, that we honor today, are not called saints because they were necessarily great people. We call them saints not because of the way they lived, what they did or didn’t do. We call them saints because of what God in Christ has done. The word, like every life, is **Redeemed**.

Martin Luther described this redemption as received in baptism. He said, “Baptism clothes the Christian in the righteousness of Christ...” Luther acknowledges too that the believer continues to struggle with the power of sin throughout life. He does not deny it. But, through the power of the Holy Spirit, that clothing ain’t coming off - baptized into redemption, gift of God, makes us saints.

Pastor Nadia says it a little differently:

...we can go through ordeals - of our own making and the making of others - we can accumulate so much grief and pain in this life and yet, in any spiritually significant way those are not the parts that remain. Because Jesus Christ, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, is at work, which means the story is still working itself out: Your story. Your loved ones' stories. All our stories.

Let me ask you, what is the grief you carry today? Who have you lost that you grieve for today? Perhaps grief has subsided through the years and you simply want to honor and remember them - perhaps a few names, perhaps one in particular.

In a few moments we will make visible our remembering, our honoring, and our grief - and we'll do it with light. I'll invite you forward to light candles for all the sinner/saints you remember today. It's in this way that we will center not only the reality of death in our lives, not only our grief, not only our hope in the resurrection, but the mercy of God in Christ.

We will take some time to behold the beauty that's created by it all - we'll behold the thinness of the veil that separates us in the light that only grows. For we celebrate on this day, in this way, because of God's redeeming mercy that was for them, and is for you. God's mercy, that redeems every sinner and welcomes them into God's very self, saints.

AMEN

Those who belong to this age, but those who have a place in that age...
Children of God are children of the resurrection
The dead are raised... the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob
Not God of the dead, but of the living (all of them are alive)

Centering that which lives along the sides, the margins...
Reflection of God's centering of the dead... attend...

In Halloween we see echoes of the Gaelic pagan festival of **Samhain**...
the moment when the veil... was at its thinnest... Our contemporary
Western celebrations forget the dead altogether, or at least remove them
from any association with grief and loss. They offer no comfort to those
who mourn. We are, after all, a society that has done all it can to erase
death, to pursue youth to the bitter end, and to sideline the elderly and
infirm... Today's Halloween simply reflects what we secretly think - that
death is a surrender to decay that makes us monsters. -Wintering 56-57

Ghosts may be a part of the terror of Halloween, but our love of ghost
stories betrays a far more **fragile desire**: that we do not fade so easily
from this life ... that the living will not lose the meanings that seem to
evaporate when our loved ones die. - Wintering 59