

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

November 3, 2024 (All Saints Sunday, Year B)
John 11:32-44
Isaiah 25:6-9
Revelation 21:1-6

Something interesting happened the other night. It really was bizarre. Here I was at church, minding my own business, and I caught a glimpse of something. I looked closer, and what should I see, a child, but not a child, a ghost of a child, ghoulish in appearance. A strange and frightening sight to be sure, but as if that wasn't enough, the apparition spoke to me, and with a voice that sent shivers down my spine, it asked me for CANDY. And if that wasn't enough to haunt one's dreams, it happened again, and again. The procession of monsters continued throughout the evening, 500 more times, each with the same words: "Trick or Treat."

What a strange phenomena this Halloween is. What was once only the night before All Saints, All Hallows Eve, a night to dress up to mock the spirits that deny of the victory of our Lord, has become a spectacle all in itself.

But what's even more strange is the DISCONNECT between Halloween and All Saints. I mean, have you noticed that while we seem to have a nearly INSATIABLE appetite for GRAPHIC images of violence and death in our television, movies, video-games, and news, at the same time we seem increasingly to be in denial about the common, everyday, garden VARIETY death which awaits all of us?

And so hospitals often refuse to refer to their patients DYING but speak, instead, of their EXPIRING. The Air Force doesn't report the DEATHS of pilots who crash in combat or training, but rather reports that some pilots experienced "UNCONTROLLED LANDINGS into terrain." Generals don't record how many of their soldiers DIED but rather the number of CASUALTIES their units suffered. And even the church has gotten into the act, as more contemporary marriage services don't have the couple pledge fidelity "until death parts us" but instead promise their intention of "sharing our joys and sorrows and all that the years may bring."

And so it's become, that it's ALL SAINTS' Day, the festival we celebrate TODAY, that seems odd. In stark contrast to a culture which worships youth, and boasts that "you can have it all," All Saints lifts up the stark reality of our MORTALITY by celebrating all those who have died – not those who have expired, or passed away, or been lost like a favorite pair of gloves – but rather those who have DIED...in the faith. And many of our congregations today will do as we do, name aloud those persons who have died in the past year and passed into the nearer presence of God. And this is as it should be.

Today's gospel is a tremendously HONEST story about DEATH. It doesn't in the LEAST sugar-coat or white-wash death. It looks at it as a reality. Lazarus is dead. His sisters are grieving. His friends are in tears.

And Jesus is never MORE human than he is RIGHT here. It says, "When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came WITH her ALSO weeping, he was greatly DISTURBED in spirit and DEEPLY moved," but that translation is too tame. The original Greek word used here has a deep, from the gut, HEAVING kind of pain to it. JESUS was GRIEVING. He grieved like Martha and Mary grieved. He grieved like WE grieve. He CARED!

And then we find one of the SHORTEST and most PROFOUND verses in all of Scripture: "Jesus began to weep." Think about that for a moment. The Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, WEEPS, because his friend has died. He doesn't look down with superiority on those who grieve, as if they should KNOW better; he WEEPS WITH them.

And the story doesn't get any easier from there. It doesn't even ATTEMPT to disguise the REALITY of death. They go to the tomb, Jesus says, "Take away the stone," and what does Martha, the sister of the dead man, say: "Lord, already there is a STENCH because he has been dead four days." THERE it is: the hard, cold reality of death—no HIDING from the pain. The Gospel presents for us just how AWFUL death is, just how PERMANENT it seems to be.

But, as we know, that's not the END of the story. The story ENDS with Lazarus alive.

Have you noticed the color for this day? The color for All Saints Day isn't the black of Good Friday and mourning; it's the white and gold of Easter and celebration. On this day we don't merely acknowledge DEATH, but we also place death in its PLACE. We worship the One who has POWER over death; the One who DEFEATS death. Jesus isn't just a miracle worker he resuscitates people; Jesus IS the resurrection.

And it's from the LIGHT of EASTER that we confront the DARKNESS of death. It's from the other side of CHRIST'S resurrection that we gain the courage, not to DENY death, but to DEFY it, to defy its ability to OVERSHADOW and distort our lives, for the RISEN Christ has promised us that death does NOT have the last word.

There are a lot of tears in our readings today, but the tears of Isaiah and Revelation are VERY different. They are tears of promise. There will come a time when there will be no MORE pain or sorrow; no more GRIEVING or sadness or loss, NO MORE tears. Why? Because we have a God who loves us.

Revelations says, "God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.... See I am making all things new." That's GOD'S PROMISE. We not ONLY have a Savior who stands BESIDE a friend's tomb weeping; we have a FATHER, the eternal GOD of all creation, WIPING the tears from His children's eyes. We have a God who LOVES us.

When YOU are weeping, you may feel ALONE, TERRIBLY ALONE, but you ARE NOT alone. There is One who weeps WITH you. There is One who will one day wipe away EVERY tear from your eyes. THIS One has power OVER death. This One is our Lord Jesus Christ, and he has the power to call you OUT from your tomb of tears, and give you LIFE again.

So All Hallows Eve was FUN, but today, All Saints Day, is about LIFE. Amen.