

The Reverend Marjo Anderson

All Saints Sunday

Isaiah 25:6-9, Psalm 24, Revelation 21:1-7, John 11:32-45

**7 November 2021
Salem, Bridgeport**

“Hope for the Mourning”

On All Saints Sunday we gather to remember those who have passed on before us,
those on whose shoulders we stand,
those who have by their words and deeds have guided us in our faith journey.

We gather not only to remember those we love who have died and to give thanks for what they meant to us,
but to publicly and communally express grief that they are no longer here with us.

We gather to mourn together.

And there has been so much to mourn in these last few years.

We mourn all of the losses due to the pandemic.

In the US we have lost 750,000 people to Covid-19, and worldwide the loss is over 5 million.

Despite our scientific and material advantages in this country,

our losses account for 15% of the worldwide number, though we are only 4% of the world's population.

250 million people worldwide have contracted Covid,

and within 6 weeks, the US will likely surpass the 50 million mark.

In addition to the direct health costs,

there have been indirect health costs due to the postponement of dr's visits and medical procedures.

There have been economic costs to individuals and businesses and organizations.

And there have been psychological costs to individuals and their families and friends.

We mourn all of the losses due to the pandemic.

We mourn all of the losses due to racial injustice,

We mourn those who have been killed by hate, and those who have been left to die by apathy,

We mourn not only the acts of overt prejudice by individuals

but the systemic and structural racism to which most of our white world is blind.

We mourn the fact that we have chosen to segregate our world by color,

despite God's deep love of diversity

and God's desire for oneness across all divisions within the body of Christ.

We mourn all of the losses due to racial injustice.

We mourn all of the losses due to global warming.

We mourn the loss of life and property from wind and water and fire,

due to the rapidly increasing frequency of catastrophic storms and droughts.

We mourn the loss of 23 of God's marvelous species which will be declared extinct this year.

We mourn all of the losses due to global warming.

And of course we mourn those loved ones who have died.

There is so much to mourn.

And yet... we gather here to do more than mourn.

We come here to find comfort, to be healed, and to have our hope restored.

So let me share with you some of the hope I have found in our scripture readings today,
the kind of hope which leads to healing.

Our New Testament reading today is not only from the book of Revelation, the last book of the Bible,
and it's from the end of that book, beginning just 50 verses before the end of scripture.

And while Revelation is often used as a scare tactic

by those who don't understand the purpose of apocalyptic literature,

it is actually designed to provide hope in the midst of despair.

I like mystery stories, but every once in a while I've begun reading one that borders on a horror story, and in those cases, I've often skipped to the end just to assure myself that there will be a happy ending, because otherwise I know it will be too hard for me to fight my way through the fear.

So reading the end of Revelation does the same thing for us:

no matter what we are going through at the moment, it reminds us how our story will end, and that knowledge gives us the hope and the faith and the courage to continue the journey even when we are beset by depression and doubt and despair.

Seminary professor and biblical commentator, René Such Schreiner, expresses it this way:

"It is a difficult thing to live with death and mourning and crying and pain, and this is why John narrates the end of the story for us.

Knowing the end of the story equips us to live through suffering...

not exempting us from it...but empowering us to live into and through that suffering...."

The Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., did much the same thing in his "I Have a Dream" speech as John of Patmos did with his book of Revelation.

In that speech he spoke of "the bright day of justice", not as a mere hope or dream, but as a reality that he could see, and that he declared to be the end of the story.

Even though the scripted portion of his speech was dominated by an inventory of his hearers' sufferings and contained only a brief mention of the bright day of justice,

he was moved to extemporaneously launch into his "I have a dream..." declarations.

Intuitively he knew that knowing the end of the story would empower people to reach that end.¹

But there is more in our scripture readings today to help us along our journey besides just knowing the end.

1. God wants us to know that he understands – that he knows what we feel – not just because God came in human form and as Jesus wept – but because we, with our emotions and feelings, are made in the image of God. God knows exactly what we are feeling, and indeed, God feels what we feel.
2. God wants us to know of his power. That's why Jesus raised Lazarus – it wasn't for Lazarus' sake. Indeed, if Lazarus experienced what others who have died and come back to life report, Lazarus probably didn't want to come back. Jesus didn't do it for Lazarus, but so people could see God's glory & come to know & to trust God's power.
3. God wants us to know of his love. Jesus raised his eyes to heaven & said, "Abba, thank you for having heard me. I know you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd, that they might believe that you sent me!" Jesus wanted them all to understand that not only did God have the power to raise Lazarus, he loved them all enough to use that power to answer their prayers. God wants us to know of his love.
4. God wants us to have life and have it abundantly. Just as God raised Lazarus from the dead, so God wants to raise us – not just from physical death, but from everything in our lives that is less than God desires for us. Isaiah makes it clear that not only does God desire us to have life and so will destroy death, but God desires to comfort us in our suffering, wiping away our tears, and to provide for us abundantly, providing not only what we need, but all we can desire. John of Patmos, too, makes it clear that God wants us to experience life at its fullest when he talks about God living with us, being fully present among us, using the image of a new heaven and new earth, a new Jerusalem, beautiful in its shining hope. He makes it clear that God wants us to experience joy when he says that God will wipe away every tear from our eyes and that mourning and crying and pain will be no more. God wants us to experience the joy of life abundant.

5. And finally, God wants to set us free
from all that binds us and keeps us from experiencing the life God desires for us.
Each one of our 4 readings today declares this desire of God
Isaiah writes,
“This is our God... the One for whose liberation we waited... the One in whom we had hoped!
We rejoice exultantly in our deliverance....”
The Psalmist writes,
“Fling wide the gates, open the ancient doors, and the Glorious Liberator will come in!
Who is this “Glorious Liberator”? YHWH, strong and mighty! YHWH, victorious in battle!”
John of patmos writes, “To the thirsty I will give drink freely from the spring of the water of life.
This is their inheritance....”,
explaining that we are no longer slaves to sin
but have been set free and made daughters and sons of the living God..
And as Lazarus stumbles out of the tomb, still bound hand and foot and face,
Jesus tells the crowd, “Unbind him and set him free.”
God wants to set us free
from all that binds us and keeps us from experiencing the life God desires for us.

No matter what you are mourning,
no matter what you are suffering,
no matter what is keeping you from experiencing the joy of life abundant,
remember that until you reach the end, each and every moment is just a step in your life’s journey.

And even when it feels that you are all alone on that journey, you are not.
God is with you.

And God is not only with you, God knows exactly what you are feeling.
God feels it with you because God is that imminent divine presence within you.

And at the same time God is also that transcendent divine power outside of you,
the God who wants you to come to know and to trust his power,
the God who wants you to come to know and to trust his love,
the God who wants to set you free from all that binds you
so that you can come to know the joy of life abundant.

There is no escape from pain and sorrow and mourning and death, because in this world of dualities,
it is the pain that allows us to know the relief of healing,
it’s the sorrow that allows us to know joy,
it’s the mourning that allows us to know comfort,
it’s the death that allows us to know life.

And so today we mourn, but we also give thanks and praise,
for a God who knows everything we’re experiencing and who wants nothing more
than to bring light out of darkness, joy out of sorrow, life out of death.

Trust in God’s power and love
and God will set you free from all that binds you
so you will come to know the joy of life abundant.

Of that, I am sure. Amen

¹ <https://www.npr.org/2010/01/18/122701268/i-have-a-dream-speech-in-its-entirety> Accessed 31 August 2021; and <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/i-have-dream> Accessed 7 September 2021]