

# Sermon

**Preacher** | The Rev. Dr. Simon J. Mainwaring

**The Gospel** | John 11:32–44

**Date** | November 7, 2021



**ALL  
SAINTS'**  
EPISCOPAL CHURCH

All week I have been puzzling a deep theological question: does the Holy Spirit support the Braves? ...26 years on from the last World Series victory, I have no doubt that many a prayer was tossed up to the heavens this week, and if you were among them I am entirely sympathetic. The last time my beloved English soccer team, Spurs, won a national title, Dwight Eisenhower had just left the White House. As any in-for-the-long-haul Braves fan can tell you, some loyalties are hard to shake no matter how little those loyalties are rewarded with victory. And as much as it can feel like the Holy Spirit has been supporting the other side all this time, we pray all the same. So, well done Atlanta, there must be a God after all.

While I don't actually believe that God answers our sports prayers, the fact that we pray them is revealing. For how true it is that oftentimes God is the name we invoke when all other hope is lost. It's a kind of functional atheism that takes God off the shelf only in times of real emergency. Yet, what our longings for divine intervention on behalf of our favorite sports teams also reveal is our innate desire to thrive together. And there's a lot that's good about that. It helps us learn to cheer one another one, to strive alongside other people. We come together with friend and stranger as did the hundreds of thousands who lined the streets to celebrate the Braves on Friday. Togetherness is a wonderful gift.

Of course, we have faced an almighty stress test of our own togetherness these past 18 months through the course of this pandemic. We've been through stages of separation, of true isolation and distancing, to ways we have gathered on screens, and then outside, and then here, in masks, almost but not quite back to normal. There are many, like each of you here in the church today, who have returned to those pre-Covid church-going days. Others are waiting to come back when all of this is behind us, either because it is not yet safe to return, or because masks are an impediment to worship, or it might just be that church on the sofa with a warm cup of coffee is too good to give up.

No doubt we will arrive at a moment when it feels like we are back together again as a church, but will we be the same church as we were before this all started? And beyond ourselves, are there lessons we'd like to carry with us from this time into the future? Less busyness, perhaps. A greater balance between our striving to produce and advance, and our needs for community and relationship and sabbath.

Surely the church has a pivotal role to play in shaping the future of our common life as a society. Here, in this parish community gathered around the hope and promises of the gospel, we have the opportunity to make a claim on the kind of belonging that we believe will be a good not only for us but for everyone. It is, after all, the mission of the church to reconcile all people to God and to one another. We are meant to be a people of a bigger vision, of a more generous commonwealth.

That bigger vision first requires honesty, particularly about the kinds of tribalisms that so blight our lives today and hinder our longings for communion. Just think of the ugly displays in recent school board meetings where seemingly otherwise kind and loving human beings could be heard screaming into microphones. Or the threats made in person and online to health professionals who are simply fulfilling their vocation to the public welfare. We have built an entire political economy on enmity. Moral outrage - whether coming from the left or the right of the political spectrum - is a ready-to-hand tool for how people seek to confront difference. And nobody is more wounded than the righteous victim, nobody more immovable, nobody more sure of the wrong-headedness of those who hold opposite views.

And beyond all of this, surely where there is the greatest need for us to move past our strident tribal instincts is in the crisis facing our global climate. For when all the apparently practical arguments cautioning a too-speedy phasing out our over-reliance on fossil fuels, or eating less meat, or driving higher efficiency cars, or flying less frequently and so on, in the final analysis climate change is about the tension between the common good and our private well-being and the deep fear that change is inherently a threat.

Of all the anxieties of scarcity that can drive our view of the world, death has always been the most potent, and it is in this most pressing of our fears that the truth of the good news about is revealed. For whether we are contemplating the span of our lives or our capacity to give ourselves to the welfare of others, it is God's power and not our own that enables us to see a greater vision. It is exactly this hope that our scriptures wish to share.

Death was a constant for Israel, not merely on an individual level but as a people, occupied as they were and so uncertain if their life as a nation could ever be resurrected from a long history of domination at the hands of others. It is a profound theological statement laid out in these scriptures that claims not merely that God comforts us on our way to our inevitable demise, but that God has in fact defeated death altogether. Isaiah proclaims that God will 'destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever.' Likewise, the Revelation of John foretells of that new, heavenly city where 'death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away'.

And in that most poignant of gospel stories, we see the literal unbinding of Lazarus as death is defeated. It is a demonstration both of the living reality of God's dominion over death assuring us that not even our mortality can separate us from God's love, and symbolic of our need to be unbound from what constrains our vision for the kingdom of God.

This is the God, this is the love, this is the power of grace that invites us into that greater vision of human flourishing. You and I are called to be saints, to be people in whom God is made more visible, trusting in the reality of that power, thus able to name what binds us so that we can be free to walk out into the world to help in the unbinding of others and to commit ourselves to the common good. We are called to proclaim the heavenly city, a new heaven and a new earth; to comfort the troubled and to trouble the comfortable. There is a more expansive, more generous, more glorious vision of life together that our world needs to hear, and it is your hands and your feet, your heart and your life that Christ now has to proclaim it.

I pray that the day will come soon when we finally can gather again as the church in this place, yet I also pray that we will be changed. The world needs more of your generosity not less. It needs the full measure of your compassion, the soothing balm of your forgiveness and the assurance of people who are marked by faith in a God whose boundless generosity toward all creation has the power to transform this world into the dream of belovedness and justice we know to proclaim in Christ Jesus. Praise God for the gift of your life in this place and for the One who is making 'all things new'. May our lives sing a song of the saints, patient and brave and true. Alleluia. Alleluia. Alleluia.

