

A Beacon of Light



The Collect

Almighty God, you have knit together your elect in one communion and fellowship in the mystical body of your Son Christ our Lord: Give us grace so to follow your blessed saints in all virtuous and godly living, that we may come to those ineffable joys that you have prepared for those who truly love you; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, in glory everlasting. *Amen.*

First Reading *Wisdom of Solomon 3:1-9*

The souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and no torment will ever touch them. In the eyes of the foolish they seemed to have died, and their departure was thought to be a disaster, and their going from us to be their destruction; but they are at peace.

For though in the sight of others they were punished, their hope is full of immortality. Having been disciplined a little, they will receive great good, because God tested them and found them worthy of himself; like gold in the furnace he tried them, and like a sacrificial burnt offering he accepted them. In the time of their visitation they will shine forth, and will run like sparks through the stubble. They will govern nations and rule over peoples, and the Lord will reign over them forever. Those who trust in him will understand truth, and the faithful will abide with him in love, because grace and mercy are upon his holy ones, and he watches over his elect.

The New Testament Reading *Revelation 21:1-6a*

I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

"See, the home of God is among mortals.
He will dwell with them as their God;
they will be his peoples,
and 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."

And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true." Then he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end."

Gospel *John 11:32-44*

When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" So they took

away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me." When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

Over the past several weeks, I've been listening to a lot of conversation about other people's churches. As you can imagine, in having such conversations you get to hear the full range of the good, the bad, and from time to time, even the ugly. Once in a while, however, you also get the priceless.

Such a gift was offered recently as one particular individual was sharing how their church went about conducting funerals. Now, the danger in having these sort of conversations, I have discovered, is that there can easily be a tendency to make comparisons. After all, we tend to like the way that we do things at home, especially when it comes to the service that says farewell to those we have loved so well. For me, one of the most beautiful aspects of our parish's ministry to families and loved ones at funerals is the attentively detailed love and care that the members of the Guild of the Good Shepherd put into their ministry in offering hospitality following the service. For those of you who are members of that Guild, I want you to

know that your quiet and often unseen acts of service to others are a profound gift to this parish.

That said, as this one recent conversation about funerals and what happens afterwards went on, it became clear to me that we may have met our match. Not only did this particular parish in question also know how to put on a wonderful spread of hospitality following their funeral services, seemingly, they have taken it a step further, intimated by what they call themselves: the Lazarus Guild. I guess we know now that southern hospitality can only take a person so far. Here at All Saints', we draw the line at mortality.

Of course, losing a loved one can be a painful and life-shattering experience, and while on one hand to laugh about a church somewhere near here that might have a rather over-ambitious name for its funeral hospitality ministry simply offers levity to what we know is a weighty topic, as well as being humorous it is also indicative of something more significant. For truth be told, when it comes to death, many of us would love to imagine that we *could* somehow cheat it, and that we might be able to have our own Lazarus moment.

John's account of the raising of Lazarus is uniquely his, a story of flesh and spirit to be sure, at home in the fourth gospel's theological arena of the eternal Word assuming finite flesh. Yet for all of its implications of cosmological grandeur - of a God in Jesus for whom even mortality is no barrier - the story of the raising of Lazarus is filled with questions that can so easily be our own. Why was Jesus so late onto the scene? *"If you had been here, my brother would not have died"*. How many of us have uttered such desperate words? Indeed, isn't that so often the case with personal griefs and losses, that we can find ourselves in the days and weeks to come stumbling across a landscape littered with 'if only's' and 'what if's'.

As we linger on the scene with Mary and Martha, and Jesus and the to be unbound Lazarus, the questions deepen. Why him, and not others? Why does Lazarus find favor with the divine and not the neighbors down the street or across the world or in my home, where I am feeling so keenly the absence of the loss of the one I have loved yet have no power to call back. Why cannot all the dead be unbound, and especially those who have died too young, or at the hands of others, or to a merciless disease?

From some such profound questions to our consumer society's anti-aging creams and cry-o-genics, there is something in the human condition that is perennially unprepared for its one true certainty, whether that be our own end or another's. Yet our struggle with death, as real and as present as these deep swirl of emotions and existential questions might be, is always and evermore imbued with another truth; that we are not made merely to die, but are bearers of a life that is beyond this one alone.

Some years ago, I had the privilege of witnessing this movement from the anxiety of our mortality to a recognition that we face something more than our end in death, in an exchange of a mother and a son in the son's final days of his life. He was dying of AIDS in a hospital on the north side of the Castro District of San Francisco. The day I saw him, he was frantically rehearsing what he felt he needed to say to his mother who was soon to arrive at the hospital. As far as he could tell, she had not accepted the fact that he was about to die, and so he wanted somehow to bring her to that realization by telling her what she should do with this car and his music collection, his clothes and other belongings after his passing.

As his mother arrived in the room, he launched into his lengthy monologue, trying to balance kindness with practicality, while his mother waited patiently for a gap in the stream of his consciousness to emerge, until at last he paused. As he did, she leaned in to him on his hospital bed, took her son in her arms and told him softly, *'You are a beautiful, beautiful man, and I will always love you'*. Nothing more needed to be said, or planned, or pretended, and death was allowed an entrance, like an old and expected friend, and for the time that they had left, they both could live, and be alive more fully to one another. Perhaps T. S. Eliot would have called that exchange between mother and son a 'timeless moment', a glimpse of the eternal breaking into our finite and fleshly struggle to come to terms with the fact that we cannot go on forever in this life, yet in the next, like his mother taught, we shall never cease to be loved.

I hope so very much that something of that truth might find its home in you: that you and I meet in the name and reality of a love that will never cease to be ours, even as we cease to live in the bodies we know that love in now. Let's be clear, such a claim is no small truth, for it is the realization that you and I and all people are bearers of a divine light and love that constitutes what it is of real value that we have to offer the world around

us. For, as the Wisdom of Solomon so beautifully puts it, each of us is made to carry God's light within us, like sparks running through stubble. Yet, I wonder, do you believe in the power of such a luminosity? Is being bearers of God's light enough for you to serve a world longing for its own Lazarus moments?

Great questions, aren't they, for us on this celebration of our patronal festival of All Saints', not only because this is the day when we mark time in the life we share as a community of faith in this city, but also because this is the day that we have chosen to renew our commitment to one another. To commit your financial pledge of support to the mission and ministries of this parish is not merely an act that chooses to join your economic power with others to be a greater force for good in the world around us, it is to take each individual flare of light that every one of us carries within, electing to make as one body a great communion of light. If we are to be faithful to our calling as the church of God on this block for another 115 years of All Saints' days, then we will have to trust that the light of the Church universal, the light of God's love and grace, the light of justice and peace, the light of mercy and forgiveness, the light of humility and compassion, the light that gives itself away for the

life of others, is not only enough for you and I, but is sufficient to set a whole world aflame with hope.

For that is what our world needs of us, perhaps especially in this present hour: to trust that our sparks, running through stubble can become, when we join as one body, a beacon of light. Perhaps for too long the church around us has asked what it might do so that people will still like to come be with us. Perhaps we have been tempted to think that our work as the church needs to be more relevant, or more agreeable, or more satisfactory to the people who are looking for a comfortable religion, when our calling is to be a church that doesn't give people what they want, but challenges them to be changed into what they need to become.

'Unbind him', Jesus says of Lazarus, 'and let him go'. Perhaps the Lazarus Guild folks have a point: it's time to let those sparks of light be seen, set free and made a radiance for the sake of this hurting and hopeful world. May we continue to be in this corner of the kingdom the church that raises the dead hopes and lost lights of the people around us. Your spark is made to become a beacon of light. For all the saints of this world, let us commit to that living hope and learn ever deeper how to shine.