

Wrapped in the Warmth of His Promises

All Saints Sunday
The Reverend Nancy R. Easton

November 5, 2006
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Isaiah 25:6-9; Revelation 21:1-6a; John 11:32-44

Grace and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

A professional counselor related recently that when her father died, she and her mother and sisters went through his belongings, eventually distributing all his personal effects except his overcoat hanging in the hallway. This daughter offered numerous times to take the coat to Goodwill, but her mother always refused the help, saying she'd take care of it herself. And so the overcoat hung on that hook in the hallway for ten years, until her mother died. She died in her sleep, and was found, wrapped up in her late husband's coat. What would have appeared to others as a simple piece of clothing was for her a way of being close to her husband.

I recall that, not long after my brother was killed in a car accident, I found his pair of glasses atop my mother's bedroom dresser. Danny was as near-sighted as I am—he, too, wore glasses from a young age. Following the accident, the state police gave my parents his belongings found with him in his car, including those glasses. The frames were twisted and broken. I held up the glasses to look through them. There was a dark smudge on the one lens. When I began to wipe it off, my mother said, "Don't do that! Don't wipe it off." Turns out it was a little spot of Danny's blood. 26 years have come and gone since Danny died, but I suspect that somewhere in my mother's dresser drawers is that pair of broken glasses, tenderly packed away.

When someone we love dies, there seems to be an innately human desire to keep them close to us, somehow. We look for a way to be with them, but the truth is we know our efforts won't entirely succeed. There is this wall, this barrier between the living and the dead, and as much as we want to stay close to those who've died, try as we might, we can't remove the barrier. In vain we hold onto those we love on this side, for they have already crossed over to that side. We wrap ourselves in their clothing, sit in their bedroom, linger before the casket is closed, talk to them in the cemetery, leave their voice on the answering machine (just to hear it once in awhile). It isn't much . . . but it's something.

Our Gospel lesson today opens up with that same reality you and I experience when a loved one dies. See what Mary and Martha, the sisters of Lazarus, are experiencing. Their brother, who has been gravely ill, dies. He has been bound up in strips of cloth, as was their custom, and then buried in a tomb with a stone to cover the opening. So, weeping outside the tomb is the closest they can be to their brother. The finality of his death is overwhelming not only for them, but also for the others gathered with them to mourn for Lazarus. The fact that Jesus has been delayed in arriving at Bethany is simply another nail in the coffin, to use an anachronistic cliché. Mary and several others, having witnessed Jesus' power to heal are convinced that had he just reached Bethany when Lazarus was ill, then Lazarus would be alive and well today. The snide aside coming from some people's mouths is this: "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" The barrier of death is formidable, they aren't dealing well with that barrier, and they're taking it out on Jesus.

We don't deal well with the barrier either, because you and I can't do anything about it. And, at first glance in this Gospel lesson, it would appear that Jesus can't do anything about it, either. In fact, John the Evangelist writes, "Jesus began to weep." (It is, for those who keep track, not the shortest verse of the Bible. The shortest verse is actually I Thessalonians 5:16: "Rejoice always.") But shortest verse of the Bible or not, the point is that Jesus weeps. Here is God incarnate, the word made flesh, weeping for his people. Jesus has compassion. He grieves not only because his friend Lazarus has died, but also because God's children only see the barrier, only experience the separation, only know the finality of death. And he determines that God's children should see, experience and know something new. In our Gospel story, Jesus brings his friend Lazarus back to life. The stone is moved away from the tomb and when Lazarus emerges, Jesus tells the people to unbind him from the strips of cloth. There is to be no more barrier between Lazarus and those who love him. It is a miracle. It is a moment to rejoice. Of course, unspoken is the knowledge that, eventually, Lazarus will die again. But, bringing Lazarus back to life is, in John's Gospel, a sign of what is to come through Jesus Christ himself.

I recently read these words: "You can't wipe away someone else's tears without getting wet yourself." That's precisely what happens to God. He gets wet, too. For not only does Jesus weep, but Jesus also enters into the realm of death himself—a place all of us will enter, where loved ones will be separated, where the barrier between life and death will loom between us. Jesus enters that realm himself by dying on the cross; he gets wet with our tears as he experiences our human suffering; he plunges into our darkness in order to transform that darkness into light, in order to remove the barrier, in order to wipe away our tears. It is his will and purpose to shatter the finality of death with the shattering of his own body, and then the resurrecting of that body to new life—a sign and promise of our own new life to come. So we recognize the truth in our 1st lesson when Isaiah prophesies years earlier that God would destroy “. . . the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever.” And God rightly declares, as written in our second lesson, “See, I am making all things new.”

But what do we do when the tears keep flowing anyway? When grief hits us afresh, and we struggle in our journey through this world? When, perhaps what we **want** to say to God is, “No, I don't see how you are making all things new.” Isn't it true that at those moments our pain and grief can become barriers themselves, become our tomb? Isn't it true that at those moments our pain and grief can bind and constrict our movements, our living, the way those strips of cloth bound and constricted Lazarus?

Well, it is at those moments of deepest grief when we need to look once more at the persons we love who have died. That's what Gerald Sittser did, and his words help me. His wife, daughter, and mother died together in an accident. Sittser, overwhelmed in his grief and in the senselessness of their deaths wrote this: “Perhaps I did not deserve their deaths; but I did not deserve their presence in my life either. On the face of it, living in a perfectly fair world appeals to me. But deeper reflection makes me wonder. In such a world I might not experience tragedy; but neither would I experience grace, especially the grace God gave me in the form of three wonderful people whom I lost.”

God has graced you and me by giving people to us on our journey on this earth. We have been blessed by their presence among us, however brief or long. It has **all been gift**. We light candles on this All Saints Sunday for those who have died, realizing their days have been rays of light streaming across **our** days.

These candles stand as vindication that a person's light will not go out, but will be joined to the eternal light of life in God's kingdom. They are saints, these loved ones we name today. We remember them as, for example, the saint who loved her grandchildren, or gave unselfishly of his income to the church, or played the piano and helped me lead worship in Dauphin County Prison, or served as gracious hostess to guests in her home, or nursed the sick in their hospital beds, or cared for his invalid spouse. They are saints, not because they were perfect, but because God was at work through them, just as he is still at work through us.

*The stories of their lives, however brief or long, point to God's continued activity in our world, serve as signs of God's care for his people, and provide us with a glimpse of the newness he promises will be ours for eternity. So let us surround ourselves with **their** stories, and wrap ourselves in **his** promises, like that widow wrapped herself in her husband's coat. **AMEN.***