

It's the Event

All Saints Day
The Reverend Nancy R. Easton

Saturday, November 31, 2009
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Isaiah 25:6-9; John 11:32-44

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

It was our first family trip to Washington, D.C.—President's Day, 2002. The children were 10, 7, and 4. The weather was cold, but clear. It was a whirlwind one-day tour of some of the basic sites in our nation's capital. We wanted to impress upon our children the richness of history through this day trip. So we gazed through the fence at the White House; we visited the Lincoln Memorial, the Vietnam War Memorial and the Korean War Memorial; we toured the Smithsonian and saw dinosaur bones and the Hope Diamond; we trudged up the hill at Arlington Cemetery to see the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Now, we didn't drive into D.C. Instead, we drove to Shady Grove in Maryland, and took the Metro train into the city. And when the day was over, our older children, Sarah and Matthew, were eager to tell their teachers all they had seen. We then asked Rebecca, our 4-year-old, what she liked best—what she would tell her preschool teacher. Rebecca liked ... the escalator at the Metro train station. The escalator. It was the first of many times my husband and I realized, through our children's eyes, that sometimes it's the event. No matter what goals we might have planned for our family in these historical trips (and we considered the escalator merely *a means* to the goals we set), our children will inevitably remind us that what matters for them is the event.

We grown-ups need that reminder because the truth is, we're often oblivious to "the event." We're usually trying to get from point A to point B in our lives, so much so that point A doesn't interest us at all, and when we finally get to point B, our attention is diverted and devoted to reaching point C. It plays itself out through our lives. Older children can't wait to be teenagers. Teenagers can't wait for that driver's license and living on the college campus when they aren't constantly under the thumb of their parents. Graduates can't wait to test their skills in the job market and climb the corporate ladder. Parents of young children can't wait until diapers and sippy cups are things of the past. Parents of college students can't wait until educational loans are paid off. Homeowners can't wait till there's a mortgage to be burned. Working folks can't wait until retirement and days of leisure. We are goal-oriented people in a goal-oriented society and we don't rest easily in one place for very long. We're anxious to move onto the next stage. We forget to live in the event.

And then we listen to the story from John's Gospel about how Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. Today we only have the second part of that story, and it's the portion that reminds us how one day in the future our Risen Lord Jesus will raise us up to live with Him—the raising of his friend Lazarus from the dead was a sign of the power Jesus had and still has over death. I suppose that we goal-oriented people appreciate John's sharing this story with us, because it tells those of us who live by faith that we're going to go from point A to point B—though you and I will die, we, too, are assured of a future with God, of eternal life through the power of Jesus' own death and resurrection. This story comforts all of us who grieve the death of someone we

have loved—including those from our congregation who died this past year—we are comforted by this story because it reminds us of God’s gift of everlasting life for them, for those we love.

But I submit to you that as hearers of this Gospel story, we may fall into the same goal-oriented trap that Martha and Mary and the mourners who came to call fall into. We forget what only Jesus, and maybe Lazarus, know and understand—that, along with our promised future, what also matters is the event. Martha and Mary and all who came to mourn Lazarus are in the midst of a wonderful event.

They’ve all come for a funeral. The first portion of this story in our Gospel (which begins at the start of chapter 11) tells how Lazarus falls ill, and though Jesus his dear friend is summoned to come and heal him, Jesus is delayed. So Lazarus dies. He’s been dead, in fact, for four days. Lazarus has moved from point A to point B, so you might just as well forget about point A. Bury the man; let the official mourning rites begin. By the time Jesus arrives, those who are grieving are way past point A. And to be honest, in that culture and time, once the elaborate funeral rites were over for Lazarus, someone else in the community would have died, and those funeral rites would begin again for them. Seems all the people would do in Bethany is go to funerals. It’s as if the goal the mourners have set for themselves was death.

You know, there are some modern-day sociologists and theologians who look at our human predicament today, and say that’s exactly what’s going on—that we are “beings-toward-death.” We’re all headed in that direction. We’re all going to die. And in our driven-ness to get from point A to point B, in our inability to live peacefully and contentedly and joyfully in this moment, in this event, we’ve set a goal for ourselves, which is death. Martha and Mary let Jesus know he is too late. Even though they believe that Jesus has power from on high, even though they believe that there will be some sort of resurrection at the last day (Martha indicates that belief in vs. 27), they still consider Jesus too late for this moment in time.

But he’s not too late. Jesus comes at the right time. And he has a goal for that moment in time. Not only to restore his friend Lazarus to earthly life. Not only to bring about faith from those who witness this miracle. Not only to reassure his followers from that day down to this day that we all are promised resurrection into eternal life. But something more.

Jesus comes into the midst of God’s people to confront the old ways they faced death and give them a new way to live. Jesus comes at the right time, and those who witnessed that moment in Bethany experienced resurrection for themselves, right then and there. For the raising of Lazarus **is the event** in which Jesus tells his followers they are no longer to be oriented to death, they are not “beings-toward-death,” but rather they are “beings-toward-life” because they know Jesus is the living Lord of all, and now they live in him.

Jesus comes to Bethany not simply to let his disciples know that some time down in the hazy future, there’s going to be this thing called eternal life, point Z. Jesus comes to Bethany to let his disciples know that a glimpse of this new life is here now as well, even here at point A.

Each of us in this room is at a unique point in our life. Some of us are indeed in situations where we really can’t wait until we move on to point B. Some of us are anxious about what point B

might just bring—so much so that we can no longer enjoy point A, for all our worry. And some of us are grieving over the loss of a loved one, and, if truth be told, we can't wait until we see them again at point Z.

Trust God's word that you and I will be granted joys unimaginable when we enter that glorious kingdom with them. But it is equally true that here at point A Jesus has **come**. In fact, he is with us at every point, with all the grace and life-giving power he has to offer. He comes to each of us at the right time, so that you and I might know a new way to live and love and be his people in the world. And on this All Saints Day we are especially aware that His Spirit has moved in the lives of those who have died whom we love and remember. Their presence among us—their friendship and love, their witness and service in God's name, the gifts God so richly poured into them through his Holy Spirit—all these things have made each day we spent with them an event so worth experiencing. They have been blessings to us. With those enduring and sweet memories to hold, we are reminded once again that, sometimes, it's the event. **AMEN.**