

Isaiah 25:6-10a

Psalm 23 *Sung Response: My shepherd will supply my need, beside the living stream.*

1John 3:1-3

John 11:17-27

## **The Meaning of Life**

**November 2, 2008 All Saints/All Souls**

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“Yea, though I walk through a valley with shadows dark as death, I will not fear, for **you** are by my side.”

“If **you** had been here, my brother would not have died,”

There is tension between the lovely peace of Psalm 23, and Martha’s indignation in our Gospel.

We live with this tension: The tension **between** trust in God’s presence and despair at God’s absence; the tension **between** belief in God as the One who holds the mystery of all life, and anger that God does not hold tragedy back. We live with the conflict **between** gratitude for the abundance of blessings as our cup runs over, and cursing because we know that they are often only ours on the backs of others; the conflict **between** hope in a God who can yet make good come of evil, and disappointment that God was not true to God’s promises: all do not have life to the full.

Thomas Merton has called such moments, “the dark night of the soul.” They are experienced in the deepest heart of prayer, where God’s absence and God’s presence meet and wrestle, - **we** wrestle.

Life is full of this tension that Martha exudes in her running to meet Jesus: Disappointment, heart-ache, and despair on the one hand, and on the other, trust, hope, and faith that we so want to hold on to, and do hold on to even when we don’t know why: “I know that God will give you everything you ask.” Even to undo death? I often wonder when there is a tragic or pre-mature death, we, in religious services, don’t ask this miracle of God: “Bring him back,” as Martha almost seems to be asking of Jesus: “I know God will give you whatever you ask.” Is God a miracle-worker or not? The ultimate test.

Jesus responds to Mary: “I am the resurrection” – literally, “I am the rising” – “I am the rising and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.”

And in the middle of Martha’s indignation and incomprehension; in the middle of her sorrow and grief, she gets to confess the greatest faith of anyone in this Gospel; she alone reveals to us who Jesus is: The Anointed [whom her sister Mary anointed!], the

One of God and sent from God, the Life coming into the world. In the midst of her despair, she still holds onto hope and faith. In the midst of grief, she still holds on to life.

But what did Jesus mean by saying even those who die will live, and even more complicated, the living will never die? What does *Jesus* mean when he says “life”? He’s not talking about the life we know about. What is the *meaning* of [this] “life”?

Many of the current discussions around “life” have to do with beginnings and ends: When does life begin? And when has life ended: Physically, spiritually when does life start for a soul? Qualitatively, when has life ended?

We can understand that often “life” for a certain person has already come to an end, before death has arrived,- they have known “finality”, “closure”, but not yet the grave - and they welcome it when it comes – for them, it is a part of life, and it is needed rest by the living stream. And we know that death can come long before a person’s life is over: “If you had been here, my brother would not have died,” says Martha.

And Jesus responded by rattling off a riddle about life: About rising, and about dying but really living, and never really dying. What is this meaning of life of which *he* speaks? A teacher of mine answered the riddle: “It’s a tomb with a view,” - just like the story to follow, which many of you will know, the raising of Lazarus. That story powerfully illustrates this different type of “life”: Lazarus will still be shrouded, but alive – both fully having died and also living.

When it comes to the questions about life, we often focus our energy into beginnings and ends. And rightly so, because often joys and promises, tragedies and dashed hopes tend to orbit around birth-moments and death-moments. Those outer limits of life as we experience it are real; they are where heart’s melt, where heart’s leap, and where heart’s break. Utter joy, gratitude, and hope at birth. Utter sorrow, incomprehension, and even despair when life flees. We cannot help but experience life in terms of a “term”, because that is the reality we live with in this world: born into it and borne out. We gather around those two book-ends, just as the Judeans gathered around Mary and Martha to console, to comfort, to grieve, and to give them heart to go on, when all hope is gone. We require communal and ritual mourning at death, - as we do celebration at birth.

But what of the life that comes in between, and what of the life that is out there beyond our known parameters? What about life – not this life – but Life write large. John, in his Gospel, through the wordplay of Jesus, challenges us to see life as something other than a line with a beginning and an end.

In this, I am reminded of those who used to think – or still do - that the earth is flat: You get to either end, and you climb on or you fall off. And even now in our understanding of the universe, we still want to give it a beginning and an end: Science has to some extent “measured” our dense singular beginning that holds all of us,

everything that can be, everything that is, in one, - AND bang – *now* we can actually measure the outer limits of our universe that we planets and solar systems are expanding into or contracting from, like breath. It is marvelous. There is life and truth in it all.

But like those who thought we had a flat earth, we seem now to have a "flat" universe<sup>1</sup>, - you know where it started, and now, you get to its outer reaches that we can measure, and then nothing, you fall off. We do not yet have an explanation – or even a language - for what lies outside: What are we expanding in? Our minds have a hard time stretching that far, and so we live in and with the mystery of space and time, and the even greater mystery of whatever lies beyond that. Physics itself will need some re-thinking to accommodate what it cannot yet account for, but what must be.

And so like a flat earth, or a fenced off “universe”, sometimes our vision of life is also flat – we think of it in terms of beginnings and endings, when maybe there’s also an alternate perspective. All Saints Day and All Souls Day, both which we celebrate today, encourage us to remember this other perspective on “Life”. We celebrate all souls every week in one of the voices of our Eucharistic prayer... - listen for it, especially today. And especially today, we ritualize and remember where the Life that transcends death, and our mortal life here on earth, meet: The communion of saints, both living and dead.

The place where our life and the “Life” that Jesus talks about meet is in relationship, is in community. For Remembrance happens in community – those who have gone before live through us in community. Consolation and celebration happens in community. The hope for the future is nurtured in community. The Spirit moves in community, where 2 or more are gathered; the Spirit delights in diversity; the Spirit unites all through the simple breath we share and through wild whirlwinds of creativity using everyone’s gifts. Spirit-life, true life, happens in community. Community carries all that has been, all that is, and all that will be, and so, community is the closest thing to eternity we have in this life: Life here and now has a place in that larger Life, and reflects it, in community.

Jesus said: *“I am the rising and the life. The living will not die, and the dead will live.”* Notice that in what Jesus says there is no mention of a beginning, and no opportunity for an end. And notice the interesting use of language that John uses: Jesus says: I am the rising, and I am life... And Martha confesses: You are the one coming into the world. Rising and coming are active, continual, and present... they are something that has been, and is, and is yet to come. This is the language of evolution – from what was, to what is, to what will be..., and coincidentally, it is also the language of the mystery of our faith. The One who was, is, and shall be. And it is what community seeks to embody: A life that will whirl without end.

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<sup>1</sup> The idea that we are dealing within a framework of a "flat universe" (you get to its measured limits and then "fall off"), not dissimilar to our once conception of a "flat earth", comes from Jason Rosenberg, composer and musician. We do not yet have the language or science to accommodate newer dimensions required to better grasp the cosmic reality.

When I finally “got” the liturgical distinction between All Saints and All Souls, – where All Saints Day honors those remarkable figures of faith, while All Souls Day allows the rest of us “in,” like poor relations. When I finally “got” this, I thought of the irony – how the communion of all those “living and dead” is divided into two groups. Those a bit “better” than us, then “us.” Those of us not yet beatified get second rank. We get November 2<sup>nd</sup>. But this year, we are lucky. Because All Saints Day was a Saturday, we get to celebrate both together. The Saints get to eat at the kid’s table. And so with Mary and Martha and alongside all those figures of faith that we know so well and admire, including and especially each other, we stand in communion – in community - today. For “What we will be has not yet been brought to light, but we will all be holy like God.” What we will be: what we are rising into, what we are coming into, what we will evolve into, is a thing more true to ourselves, more good to others, more of the human spirit that transcends brokenness, more of the divine spark that gives us peace even when there is no peace. “In the presence of many woes, you set before me a table.”

Until death is destroyed forever, until there are no more shrouds and veils of mourning hung over this war-torn world so steeped in death and indignity, we have each other, and we can keep on rising from all that has been into what can be, and we keep on coming to table, to forge a better world that all can call home. From all that has been and all that is, we can create a house of God here today even as we anticipate that one day, one day, when we will all dwell in the house of God forever, where all cups will overflow, all will be anointed, and tears will be no more. May we seek to make it so here, as we anticipate it in the hereafter. Amen.