

All Saints' Day – Year B – November 1, 2009
Wisdom of Solomon 3:1-9; Psalm 24; Revelation 21:1-6a; John 11:32-44
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Today is All Saints' Day when we remember, not just the famous saints of days gone by, or even the unsung faithful who have died in the knowledge and love of God, but also the present-day saints. As we reflect on life, we also acknowledge the inevitability of the end of our own lives and the lives of our loved ones. Death is no less a part of life than birth. As Paul Tillich wrote, "It is our destiny and the destiny of everything in our world that we must come to an end.... [Our own end may be revealed to us] in the farewell to a place we have lived for a long time, or the death of someone near to us. Or it may become apparent to us in the [end] of a work that gave meaning to us, the end of a whole period of life, ... or even in the melancholy side of nature visible in autumn. All this tells us: [we] will also come to an end."

In today's Gospel lesson we see something we can all relate to: the misery, mourning, and even anger that accompanies the end of Lazarus' life. But the story doesn't end there. The stone is rolled away and Lazarus is bidden forth into new life. In the reading from the Book of Revelation we read, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end" (Revelation 21:6). We are witnesses to a predictable slice of temporal life, and a most uncommon event in the resurrection of Lazarus. All framed in the presence of the One who became part of time, but who is also beyond all time. Today, Jesus is going to help us open a huge door to reveal God's glory. You've probably noticed that the bigger the door, the more hinges it has. Within the thirteen verses of the Gospel story there are four hinges – all imperative commands.

The first hinge comes after Lazarus has died and Jesus finally arrives in Bethany. Despite knowing what was to happen, the depth of Jesus' compassionate love is expressed as he weeps with Mary and Martha. He asks where Lazarus is laid and that is when we hear the first pivot point in the words, "Lord, come and see." Jesus first uses this phrase at the beginning of His ministry when he invites Andrew and another disciple to come and see where He is staying. In turn, Phillip uses the same words to invite Nathanael to meet with Jesus. In John 4, we find the Samaritan woman rushing back to town after her encounter with Jesus at the well, and telling everyone "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" And now, as the tears roll down his own cheeks Jesus is invited to come and see where his beloved friend Lazarus has been buried. From the beginning of His ministry to this His seventh and final sign, we are invited to come and see, so that we too may follow and know that this is the One whom God has sent. What is so exciting for us is that this bidding is part of Jesus' living presence in our own lives. In Christ, you and I are constantly called to come and see. We can never reach the end of Christ's gifts to us, or the depths of Christ's glory.

Our second turning point is the command to "Take away the stone." In the broader context of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem and the completion of His earthly mission, we remember Mary Magdalene and the other women coming to Jesus' tomb and wondering who will roll the stone away for them. What they discover is that Christ is risen. The cold, dark tomb cannot contain God's Word. In this story, Martha, still thinking on a practical level, immediately voices her concern that Lazarus' body will already be stinking with decay. She has forgotten that Jesus is the resurrection and the life, imagining resurrection only to be on the last day. Martha is about to learn that in Christ, our resurrection life is not delayed or denied. It is now. It has already begun. As Tillich notes, we will each experience different endings and types of death. Yet, while our grief may draw us to the tomb, our hope in Christ offers us the opportunity for new life, and ultimately the promise of everlasting life. It is, however, risky to live as though the eternal is now. We risk seeking out the darkest corners of our brokenness and the brokenness of the world. We risk having to face the stench of our own sins and the sins of others. And we risk the faith necessary to roll aside all the stones that block the healing and

life-giving light of God.

Jesus cries out with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” and our third hinge is opened. Let’s insert our own name before this command as if Jesus were speaking to each of us this instant, calling us all out of the darkness into the light of new life. Let’s hear it in our hearts and in our minds. How do we respond? Jesus has just given thanks to God for answering His prayer of life for Lazarus. Before you and I ever stepped into new life, Jesus knew the faith in our hearts and gave thanks to God. In John’s gospel Jesus’ miraculous signs are never disconnected from His dependence on God. In revealing God’s glory, Jesus is also validating His own identity as God’s Son, so that in Him all may believe, and have life in His Name. God steadfastly refuses to allow death to be the final word. Jesus, the word made flesh, has freely entered into the suffering of the world, so that all may be convinced that “neither death, nor life, ... nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38-39). Jesus’ words give life. Jesus is *the Word* in whom the promise of eternal life rests for all who come in faith.

The final hinge is truly stunning if we are willing to embrace its promise, which is found in a multitude of possibilities, according to God’s grace. Jesus says, “Unbind him, and let him go.” What does that mean to us? Does Jesus offer us the gift of new life, and salvation and then cut us loose? Oh no, there is so much more to life in Christ. The filthy rags of our old life, our grave clothes if you will, are transformed into a shining garment of righteousness. And implicitly, righteousness is about being in right relationship with God and with one another. We are His beloved, the friends for whom Jesus lays down His own life. God’s love for us is unending and ever present. The Holy Spirit dwells within us, and even in our uniqueness we are interconnected as the Body of Christ in the world. Here’s one other clue for our consideration of this last pivotal point in the revelation of God’s glory. In the Greek, the last word is *aphiemi* (af-ee-ay-mee). In the Gospel of Matthew, the same word is also used when Jesus teaches the disciples to pray, “forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” (Matthew 6:12). It means forgiveness for sins, and release. When we accept Jesus’ invitation to come and see, roll away the stones, come forth into the light, and are unbound before Christ, we are forgiven, and released from the bondage sin and death.

“‘I am the beginning and the end.’ This said to us who live in the bondage of time, who have to face the end, who [live with] the past, who need a present to stand upon.... There is *one* power that surpasses the all-consuming power of time [that is] eternal: He Who was and is and is to come, the beginning and the end. He gives us forgiveness for what has passed. He gives us courage for what is to come. He gives us rest in His eternal Presence,” says Tillich. Jesus says to you and to me, and to all the faithful, you are released, you are free, you are forgiven. That is always the beginning. Our journey towards the end is found in Jesus’ words from the Gospel of Matthew. “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:19-20). We are children of the promise of everlasting life. The eternal glory is revealed to us in the life-giving activity of God, through the person of Jesus, by the power of the Holy Spirit. May we always join with all the saints – past, present and future – praying that whatever we do, we do everything for the glory of God (1 Corinthians 10:31).

Amen.