

John 11:32-44

A few weeks ago on a Sunday morning someone wrote on an index card that sometimes one can be very much among the living but feel dead inside. Yes, that is true and real and hard. And some of us or some that we know are looking the harshness of death in the face right now. Death is not only real and harsh; it also stings and stinks. When we speak of death, it's not only physical death about which we speak. Death's extended family also includes sin, despair, brokenness, and division. Sometimes in the world in which we live and in the struggles that we often face, we are in death. All you have to do is read or listen to the news, both national and local, to know that in the midst of life, we are in death. Death is real, and "it can threaten our sense of purpose, imagination, and value. Even in the best of circumstances, death is still the enemy. Yes, the war has been won but the fight is not over and death is still a fearsome frontier" (www.workingpreacher.org, Henry Langknecht). Tomorrow is All Saints' Day, but we're observing it today on All Hallows' Eve. Later on in today's service, Pastor Jeff and I will read the names and ring a bell for those who have died in our community since last November 1st, and we invite you to also include other loved ones who have died. These names spoken aloud and bells rung represent real loss and grief and pain for missing saints with a depth that's hard to put into words. "In a world that fears, cheapens, and desecrates death, the Church invites God's people to linger at the grave in grief, remembrance, gratitude, and hope. In a world that mistreats and abuses countless women, men, and children, the Church affirms the

value of every single soul, every single life. In a world that privileges the individual, the Church honors the deep interconnectedness of God's family across time, culture, history, and eternity. Yes, it's true: in the midst of life, we are in death. But All Saints reminds us of a deeper truth: in the midst of death, we are promised life"

(www.journeywithjesus.net, Debie Thomas), and in life and in death, we belong to God.

Today's Gospel reading is a one of the most dramatic and difficult in Scripture. Here in John 11, we find the story of the raising of Lazarus, which exemplifies Jesus' life-giving power over death. A lot has taken place in this story before now (I'd invite you to read John 11 in its entirety to get the full picture). Jesus says to Martha right before today's reading, "Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die" (vv.25-26). These are words we may hear at funerals and memorial services. Believing these words though is not always easy. There are challenges with the Christian proclamation of life when death is all around us. For example, "Mary and Martha, in today's story, reflect the tension found in believing the Christian claim that Jesus grants eternal life to the believer" (*Connections*, Gilberto A. Ruiz). Mary's blunt truth, "Lord, if you would have been here, my brother would not have died" is real. How many of us can relate to Mary's lament to Jesus and have cried out to God in similar words?! Personally, there are so many questions I have about this story. Questions such as why did Jesus take so long to get to Mary and Martha's house when he knew his good friend Lazarus was ill? Why

does Jesus say that Lazarus was asleep when he was dead? And like those gathered in today's story ask, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying" (v. 37)? I think it's fair to say that in many ways this story is filled with a great deal of mystery and many layers, as well as many sermons. Yet, today on this All Saints' Sunday, I want to focus this sermon on two things: the tears shed, particularly Jesus' tears, and the life-giving power of Jesus- not just eternally but also today- now. Yes, resurrection is around the corner but in this story, the promise of joy doesn't cancel out the essential and important work of grief (Thomas).

In verse 35 we're told that *Jesus began to weep*. Some of us sum it up as "Jesus wept." It is the shortest verse in the Bible, and it continues to be a cause for great debate among scholars. People are intrigued by this emotional Jesus. Is this a display of grief felt by Jesus over the death of his dear friend? Is Jesus upset because of the crowd's response? Is he angry that people don't get it and continue to be unable to believe? Or is he upset because his own death and grave are fast approaching?

The Gospel writer doesn't tell us why Jesus weeps. All we know is that he weeps with Mary, Martha and all who were grieving. Jesus weeps real tears, and Jesus weeps with us, too. One of my seminary professors shared that when our heart breaks, God's is the first heart to break, and likewise, when we weep, God weeps, too. John also tells us that Jesus was "disturbed in spirit and deeply moved" (v. 33, NRSV). This translation, however, doesn't adequately describe Jesus' emotions. From what we can see here in this story, Jesus has the same reaction the

mourners do. He was angry and groaning deeply in his spirit, and he wept and mourned a great loss. Maybe this is both Jesus' humanity and divinity showing up?! Even Jesus, God with us, is heartbroken by the death of his friend, Lazarus. Just as death breaks our hearts and stirs our souls, so does death grieve God. I wonder if I'm not so drawn to Jesus here because he, in his empathy...in his feeling *with* people (not *for* people- that is sympathy) gives me both permission to weep and to live in the midst of death. Through his tears, Jesus calls us into the holy vocation of empathy (Thomas). There's a big difference between empathy and sympathy. Empathy connects us to people. "I'm so sorry you're so sad. May I sit here with you?" Whereas, sympathy can sometimes disconnect us. "I know your dad just died but at least your mom is still alive." As Brene Brown so wisely reminds us, anytime you respond with "at least," you're sympathizing instead of empathizing with someone. Death stings. It stinks (v. 39). No perfume or pat answers or clichés or "at leasts" can remove this (workingpreacher.org, Ginger Barfield). What does Jesus do first upon learning the news of his friend's death? He weeps with Lazarus' friends and family.

One theologian put it this way, "In crying, Jesus asserts powerfully that it is okay to yearn for life. It's okay to feel a sense of wrongness and injustice in the face of death. It's okay to mourn the loss of vitality, of intimacy, of longevity. It is okay to love and cherish the gift of life here and now" (Thomas). Everything in today's story points to and testifies to Jesus as God's Son to whom God has given life (John 5:25-26). Hearing this story, many of us may think of Jesus' own death and

resurrection: a tomb, a stone, grieving women, linen wrappings and face cloth. We may think of how Jesus will raise us on the last day, as Martha confessed right before today's story (v. 24). Here though "Jesus calls Lazarus out, like the good shepherd calls his sheep and gives them life (10:3; 27-28). This is what Jesus does for all those who believe in him. Jesus has the power to give life now, because Jesus is the presence of God's life become flesh for us. Jesus raising Lazarus does not negate the promise of the day that is coming when all those in the tombs will hear his voice and come out (John 5:28), **but it is not primarily about that claim. What it reveals is that Jesus is the one in whom there is life (1:4), the one who even now calls us out of all the shadowy and binding places of death (5:25). Jesus is life itself; Jesus himself is resurrection's defeat of death. Jesus is the place where death ends and everlasting life begins**" (www.workingpreacher.org, Brian Peterson). Jesus says immediately before today's text, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live" (v. 25). Jesus breaks into our present and transforms our lives...now just as much as he does in our death. **On both sides of the grave there is life for us because Jesus has been set to call us out by name. "Lazarus, come out!"** I know several of you who have testified about Jesus, the resurrection and the life, standing in the shadows- in the stench-y places in our world calling you forth into unimagined life (Langknecht). I read recently where one student in seminary wrote a "Coming Out" liturgy for the removal of the bindings that cause death in life...those things that hold us back from living fully...those things that make us feel dead inside. The professor commented that although she

studies the Gospel of John for a living, she had never thought about the fact that Jesus started the process but the community together participated in unbinding the dead person, restoring them to life (workingpreacher.org, Jaime Clark-Soles). I know several of you for whom God has freed from death (addiction, health challenges, fear, unbelief) so that you can live- not so that you can go to heaven but so that you can serve here on earth and be living witnesses to the life-giving power of God (Langknecht). Can I get a witness? And if you're a person who is feeling dead inside, listen to Jesus telling you to "Come out of the shadows from what is binding you and live!"

"This is what All Saints' Day is for: not just to remember those from long ago or those whose deaths are still painfully near, and not just to point ahead to that ultimate promise of resurrection[when God will wipe away every tear from our eyes and death will be no more; when mourning and crying and pain will be no more (Rev. 21:4)], though both of these are certainly part of this day and to be affirmed. More centrally, though, this day is about what all God's saints have known and experienced here and now- that there is no death or grief or fear so deep and in the shadows that the voice of Jesus cannot reach into it, call us out, and bring life" (Peterson). I hope that as we gather around Christ's table this morning and name the lives of those who have died and ring the bell, **we'll let Jesus' tears and promise of life here and now- be our guide.** "Yes, we are in death, but we serve a God who calls us to life. Our journey is not *to* the grave, but *through* it. The Lord who

weeps is also the Lord who resurrects. So we mourn in hope” (Thomas).
Thanks be to God! Amen.