

## **“Facing Our Fear of Death and finding Hope”**

**John 11:32-44**

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In Ingmar Bergman’s 1957 film, *The Seventh Seal*, set during a 14<sup>th</sup> century pandemic that took 50 million lives, a knight decides to play a game of chess against a personification of death. The title of the film comes from the book of Revelation, and it makes for appropriate viewing during the week of Halloween, but it is a substantive film for any time that depicts our struggle with death and search for meaning.

Death is the one thing we all have in common. It is used to be death and taxes, but some people seem to have found a way to get out of the latter. So, we are left with death. Yet we will do anything to avoid talking about it, and we try every way possible to avoid it. This is what the knight in the film does, and he plays a good game of chess, but death, both in the film and in real life, always seems to get the last move.

A fellow student in a pastoral care class demonstrated how much we fear death. We were required to fill out our death certificate, naming a time, place, and cause, as way of getting in touch with our mortality before helping others do so. This student confessed a month later that he had written down that he died in a car accident at a busy intersection he went through every day two weeks after he completed the assignment. He realized after the fact that he had driven miles out of the way that day, without consciously choosing to do so, to avoid that intersection.

The fear of death is a powerful force, and our inability to talk about it simply gives it more power. But Christian faith can free us to face our fear, and celebrations like All Saints Day help. We read texts that assert that death does not have the final word. We sing songs that express feelings words alone cannot. And in the narrative of John 11, we find a story that describes the larger process of facing death where we discover hope in the promise of resurrection and in the companionship of God.

The first thing we ought to note about this narrative is that it reflects the various ways human beings respond to death. Before we

join the story, Jesus and his disciples refer to Lazarus as being asleep. In like manner, we use many euphemisms to avoid the word “death,” as if this changes reality. Mary says that if Jesus had come sooner, Lazarus would be alive! We too feel anger about what might have been. And some people in the grieving crowd wonder if someone who can give sight to the blind couldn’t have kept Lazarus from dying. It reflects the kind of theological musing we do in grief. Where was God? Couldn’t God have done something? And if God couldn’t, what good is God?

All this comes before the natural response of sadness, deep sadness, people are weeping and wailing, and we understand this response too. But we resonate with all these responses – anger, sadness, questioning. It’s what human beings do when confronting the harsh reality of death, and while putting this in a biblical story may not seem particularly insightful, it does help us to have our experience affirmed as normal. Often people in our culture, especially people of faith, seem to run from claiming their natural responses to loss and try to pretend that people of faith don’t experience any of this. But we do, we all do.

My predecessor, Dan Day, in his most recent book, *At the River I Stand: Conversations with God about Dying and Living*, describes his struggle with an ominous diagnosis. In this church, we know a good bit about this already, but these reflections, meditations, and prayers open his soul to many more through the printed word. Dan warns readers who might not want to be confronted with this kind of honesty from a faith leader what is coming, but it is a gift to have such vulnerability in print. It will give permission to people who are suffering to be honest, especially with God. The biblical characters certainly are.

Normalizing our experience doesn’t make it easy. A colleague had all he could take at a lunch meeting about the stages of grief. A friend of everyone there had been diagnosed with stage-four cancer, and they were all hoping he was moving to acceptance. Mac, who was a pastoral care professor, who taught ministers about stages of grief, said, “Well, if I am diagnosed with something like this, I’m not accepting it. I’m getting mad as hell, and I’m staying mad as hell until I leave this world!”

He wasn’t serious, and he didn’t get stuck in anger when he was diagnosed several years later. He was just pushing back on the glib talk

about stages of grief. Normalization doesn't make the journey easy, but it does help to know we are normal.

A second thing we might note about this narrative is that it presents an image of God who offers us companionship in suffering, a God who suffers with us. The text says Jesus is greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved when he learns that Lazarus has died. It says he weeps when he goes to see where Lazarus is buried. And when he arrives at the tomb, the text says again that he is greatly disturbed. Jesus, who we believe to be the very embodiment of God, is not only with the grieving family; he grieves with them. It is a powerful and comforting assertion.

Yet not everyone reads the story this way. Many theologians have reflected a Greek idea called *apatheia* which suggests that perfection in the character of God requires that God is unaffected by the contingencies of creation. John Calvin says biblical references to divine emotion are anthropomorphisms. God doesn't feel grief and anger, as we do, and for some this is reassuring. God's ways are not our ways and God's thoughts are not our thoughts. Such scholars go through all sorts of mental gymnastics to suggest that Jesus is not really grieving, nor is he angry, and even if he is, it is at the people weeping for their lack of faith.

But this seems like an incredible waste of time. Not only does the story seem to state that he is grieving, but it is immensely helpful to us that he is. It is a different image of God, One who is in touch with our experience, One who is open and vulnerable, One who knows our pain. We see this when Jesus is on the cross, feeling abandoned, utterly alone. Some may consider this weakness, a kind of weakness we cannot connect with the Divine, but it's what incarnation means, and incarnation lies at the foundation of everything we believe.

The incarnation means that God takes on flesh and all that is human. It is messy, God becomes vulnerable, God even weeps with us, but we are thankful God does. I cannot count the number of families in grief I have known who found comfort in not just the companionship of God, but the awareness that God is weeping with them. An aloof God who magically recreates life might be helpful, but a God who gets in the trenches and suffers with us before doing so is much more helpful.

But there is one other thing to note in this narrative, the most important thing, there is a word of hope as we confront death, a reminder that death does not have the final word. The readings from Isaiah and Revelation speak of a time when God will wipe away every tear from our eyes, a time when God will swallow up death forever, a time when crying and pain will be no more. It is a future hope but not only a future hope because in John 11, before we join the story, Jesus says to Mary's sister Martha, "I am the resurrection 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 (John 11: 25-26)." I *am*, present tense, not I *will be*.

It is a future hope, which is reassuring as we think today of loved ones who have preceded us into eternity, but it is also a current reality which Jesus underscores with the resuscitation of Lazarus. The power of new life is already at work, this story proclaims!

Presbyterian minister Cynthia Jarvis calls this a dress rehearsal for Easter morning (*Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Volume 4, pp. 239-240). "See the glory of God, he says. See in death defeated eternal life (another word, says Robert Jensen, for God). See – here, now, *before* you lie to die – the resurrection and the life in him. See in him the God who is (present tense) victor over death. Then live as though the Eternal were now because God is. Live as though death has no power over your days. Live as though you belong, in life and death, to God."

This is what eternal life is. Theologians call it *realized eschatology*. And this is what it means to be a saint, it involves living in a different way, a way shaped by the power of love, not the fear of death.

I think of a scene near the end of the film *Hidden Figures*. Having successfully launched a man into space and brought him home safely, NASA Director Al Harrison asks his great mathematician Katherine Johnson, "So, er, do you think we'll get to the moon." She replies, "We're already there, sir." It's like what the author of Revelation says, "It is done. I *am* the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end." It is done. It's like what Jesus says, "I *am* the resurrection and the life." We're already there. The promise of eternity is released into every present moment, and like Lazarus emerging from the tomb, we are set free from everything that binds us, even the fear of death.