

Stephen R. Shaver

Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

November 3, 2024

All Saints' Sunday, Year B, Revised Common Lectionary

Wisdom of Solomon 3:1-9

Psalm 24

Revelation 21:1-6a

John 11:32-44

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I think I saw versions of this scene in people's yard decorations all over the Junior College neighborhood while trick-or-treating on Thursday. Out comes the mummy from the tomb, lurching forth from the grave, strips of cloth hanging from his hands and feet.

It's an image worthy of a Halloween movie—yet it's not. Because instead of a zombie or mummy, animated by dark magic and summoned forth to wreak evil on the world, Lazarus is a human being, made fully alive again by the power of God working in Jesus and summoned out as a sign of God's victory over evil and even death itself.

These are the days when we come close to the mystery of death, both in church with the celebrations of All Saints and All Souls, and in our wider culture with its fascination with Halloween, a holiday that seems to have become exponentially more important in the last few decades, no longer a day just for children but one for adults as well, and rivaling Christmas in the sheer volume of merchandise that's available, from orange and purple outdoor lights to costumes from silly to spooky to skimpy to twelve-foot skeletons for your yard. There is something about Halloween that resonates with people in our society today. Maybe, in an increasingly secular society, people are drawn still to finding ways to grapple with questions of the supernatural and what it means to die and whether there is anything after. Maybe, in times that feel uncertain and anxious, people are drawn to finding ways to feel fear while also laughing at it, or at least feeling it in ways that are scripted and predictable and experienced together with others.

Today is All Saints' Sunday and today we celebrate the great body of saints, past, present, and still to come, those whose names are known to us and those who are forgotten, together with our own loved ones, those we grieve, those we miss, and even those who we struggled to love or who struggled to love us. Today we celebrate a God who is indeed victorious over death and evil. And we do it in a way that doesn't shy away from grief, or danger, or sorrow.

Our gospel story today doesn't shy away from the reality of death. It acknowledges that death brings us tears. Mary weeps; Lazarus' community weeps; and Jesus himself weeps in the face of his friend's death. He is planning to raise Lazarus from the dead, he knows this, and yet he still weeps; because death is worth weeping about. Our gospel acknowledges that death brings bodily fragility and vulnerability. "Lord," Martha says, "already there is a stench." This is not a sanitized story, and thank God for that. Because if God has good news for us in our lives it has to be a good news that can come into our own tears, our own stench, our own real and human lives.

This week this nation will make a profound and historic choice in a fraught and anxious election. Many in our community and our country are afraid right now, for many reasons. The uncertainty is real, both about the results of this election simply in terms of who will be elected, but also about the potential for civic unrest, threats of violence, attempts to subvert democracy, or simply what seems the almost foregone conclusion of more and more mistrust, diverging worldviews, and a fraying social fabric. The powers of death—which is to say, the powers that rejoice in falsehood and division and hatred—are alive and at work in our time, as of course they have been in every time.

But God is still bigger. And God is still working. "See, I am making all things new," says the One who is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end., the God who does not shy away from our tears or our smells or our suffering

Our faith isn't a faith that bad things will not happen and the worst will always be averted. It's a faith that when the worst does happen, when Lazarus dies, when we lose our home, when the diagnosis is what we feared, when we are governed by bad leaders, when cities lie in ruins and survivors mourn their beloved, that nothing can separate us from the love of the one who has promised to live with us forever and to wipe those very tears from our eyes.

Jesus didn't hold himself at a distance when he came to be one of us. He knew what it was to grieve and to suffer and to be lonely and to not get what he wanted. He knew what it was to be afraid of death. And God didn't exempt him, and he didn't exempt himself, from his own death, even a death on a cross. For Jesus, like for Lazarus, like for us, the path of resurrection isn't a path around the grave but through it.

Mary, mother of Jesus. Francis of Assisi. Dr. Martin Luther King. Mother Teresa of Calcutta. These four saints in their own generations lived in tumultuous times, all of them. They saw great suffering, great division, great upheaval, great grief. They stand here with us as signs not only of themselves but of the great multitude that is here with us invisibly, surrounding us on all sides, singing praise to God and shouting their encouragement to us who are still running our earthly race.

“Do not fear,” they say to us. “The power of death is real, but the power of God is stronger.”