

## **“Remembrance Past and Future”**

“This is the LORD for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.”

Six years ago today, I attended a funeral; but unlike a funeral service for a family member, friend, or member of the congregation, this was a funeral service for a church. On November 1, 2009, my home congregation – St. Peter’s Lutheran Church in North Plainfield, New Jersey – was closed after 118 years of ministry. It was a difficult but necessary decision to close the congregation; membership had been declining for years, and the realities of changing neighbourhood demographics and the cost of maintaining both the building and the ministry made it apparent to everyone that it was time to bring St. Peter’s ministry to an end. For one last time, we gathered together in that building which had housed the congregation for decades, the place where a member of my family has worshiped since 1924, to hear the bishop of the New Jersey Synod proclaim that the congregation of St. Peter’s was officially closed. As we gathered after the worship service for a reception in the parish hall, we look through old photographs and shared memories of the years we shared together at St. Peter’s, even as we knew that we would never again gather together in that place as the people of God.

While attending that closing worship service of the congregation that had nurtured me in the Christian faith was a very painful experience (it was the only day I was glad that my parents weren’t alive, since it would have devastated them), I knew that I needed to be at that funeral service for St. Peter’s. As both a pastor and a family member, I have grown to appreciate the importance of funerals, of times when we gather in the midst of family and friends to remember the one who had died, to share stories and memories, to grieve together as we offer one another the gift of our love and support. I have learned that the greatest gift we can offer a person who is in the midst of mourning is the gift of our presence, of being there with them as they walk through the “valley of the shadow of death.” Anyone who has walked the mourner’s path knows that the strength and comfort we receive in the company of those who gather around us gives us the ability to get through these difficult days and assures us that even in this hour of deepest despair, we are not alone. A mother who endured the loss of her teenage son would later recall how the love of family and friends gave her the strength to grieve and live again:

- “I write to honor those who held us up when our world fell apart. You held us together by giving of yourselves in so many ways. Coming quickly when we needed you. Hugs and hot dishes. Tears and telephone calls. Listening, listening, listening to our words of sorrow. Your presence was life-sustaining. You have been ‘the body of Christ’ for us. Through you, we have felt the heartbeat of God’s steadfast love. You have helped us *grieve and live again.*” – Corinne Chilstrom, *Andrew, You Died Too Soon*.

While it remains one of the saddest experiences of my life, gathering for the funeral service for St. Peter’s on November 1 was significant, for it is on this All Saints day that we remember *“all the saints who from their labours rest.”* For Lutherans, “saints” are not only those people who are remembered on special feast days, blessed persons who have churches, schools, and hospitals named after them. All of us are “saints” by virtue of our Baptism, in which we were made holy as we were *“reborn children of God and members of the church which is the body of Christ.”* The church is “the communion of saints,” for *“the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, made me holy and kept me in the true faith, just as he calls, gathers, enlightens, and makes holy the whole Christian church and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one common, true faith.”* (*Small Catechism*). On All Saints Day, we remember those who have died in the past year as well as all those who we have loved while they were among us and remember now that they are gone from our sight.

As we remember all the saints we have loved and who no longer abide with us, we may well recall their funeral services, that occasion when we gathered to remember their lives and to entrust them into God’s loving care. While we pray that our God of boundless compassion will *“console us who mourn,”* we also pray that the Lord will

*“give us faith to see that death has been swallowed up in the victory of our Lord Jesus Christ, so that we may live in confidence and hope until, by your call, we are reunited with those who have gone before us”* (ELW Funeral Service). We remember these funeral services that were occasions for remembrance – remembrance both of the past and the future, of the person’s life that has ended as well as of the promises that God has proclaimed regarding our future. When we gather as fellow mourners, we gather in the presence of our God who is both *“our help in ages past”* and *“our hope for years to come.”*

It is appropriate that two of our Bible readings for All Saints Day are lessons that are often shared at a funeral service. Our first lesson from Isaiah is a joyful celebration of life and deliverance that comes from the Lord, an announcement of salvation a vision of God’s future. It begins with the description of a meal which God prepares for all of his people, a gathering of the saints that reminds us of the meals we have shared with our loved ones who gather together at our family tables: *“On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-matured wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-matured wines strained clear.”* (25:6). This banquet on the mountain recalls the ritual meal on Mt. Sinai at the time of Moses, when *“God did not lay a hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; also they beheld God, and they ate and drank.”* (Exodus 24:11). God shares this meal with “all peoples,” signifying reconciliation and communion. As Isaiah had proclaimed earlier, the nations will come to Zion, the mountain of God, for instruction and will participate in the peace established by the Lord (*“Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.”* – 2:3).

As God gathers all peoples from all nations for this festive meal on God’s holy mountain, God also addresses the deepest human longings for an end to mourning, to death itself, and to all grief. The prophet declares that God will *“destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever.”* (25:7-8a). Death is understood as any power that threatens life, and it is life – not death – that God endorses. The affirmation of life – God’s affirmation of life – entails an end to grief and mourning as *“the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces.”* In swallowing up death, God destroys death’s power to not only end life but also to cripple it:

- *“Death not only ends life, but it also cripples it. Death exercises power over life, both as individuals recognize their own mortality and as they suffer the loss of those they love.”* – Gene Tucker, *New Interpreter’s Bible*.

The announcement of salvation pronounced by Isaiah is echoed in the words of John of Patmos in the book of Revelation, in which he describes a vision of *“a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.”* (21:1). Whereas previously in Revelation God’s presence had been hidden from humanity behind the “vault of heaven,” God will now dwell (“tabernacle”) with those who dwell in *“the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.”* (21:2). As Isaiah had also prophesied in the later chapters of his book (*“For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.”* – 65:17), what is past – “the first,” the provisional rather than fundamental – is no more. Even *“the sea is no more,”* the sea representing a threatening place to be endured or conquered. In this new setting where the former things that plagued God’s holy ones are no more, a loud voice from the throne of heavens declares that in the Jerusalem mortals are now God’s people: *“See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them”* (21:3). Because God is now making his dwelling in the midst of God’s people (God is said to be “with them” three times), the promise proclaimed by Isaiah is repeated: *“he will wipe every tear from their eyes.”* In the tabernacling presence of the Lord, *“death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.”* (21:4). John is commanded to write down these words, for they are *“trustworthy and true”* and are to be read and proclaimed as a blessing to all God’s people from the one who is *“the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.”* (21:6).

- “To the mind of the believer the consummation of all that had been predicted and promised is so certain that in a sense it may be said to have been reached before it is actually accomplished. At every stage of the struggle the believer is conscious of the final victory. Very appropriately the divine name is mentioned to underscore the completion of everything that God began: ‘I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.’” – Bruce Metzger, *Breaking the Code*.

As we gather together to offer each other the gift of our loving presence at the hour of death, Jesus came to be with his friends Mary and Martha as the sisters sat *shiva* as they mourned the death of their brother Lazarus. He came as all of their family and friends arrived that day: to embrace them in his loving arms, to comfort them with the assurance that there were others to walk with them through this valley of deepest darkness, and to support them as they considered life without their brother. But Jesus also came to offer what only our Lord and Saviour could bring to that setting: the assurance that death is not the final word for God’s people. When Martha says to Jesus “*Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.*” (John 11:21-23), Jesus responds that “*Your brother will rise again.*” Assuming that Jesus is referring to a later rising, Martha replies with her confidence that “*I know he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.*” But Jesus is referring to something far different, a gift that only he can bestow because it is at the heart of his very identity:

- “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.” – 11:25-26.

Jesus follows up his promise with action, going to the tomb of Lazarus and ordering the people to “*take away the stone.*” (11:39). Even though Lazarus has been dead four days (a confirmation of the reality of his death), Jesus looks upward and prays, “*Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you have sent me.*” (11:41-42). Jesus then cries out with a loud voice “*Lazarus, come out!*” (11:43), and he who once was dead walks out of his tomb, to be unbound and set free from not only his burial clothes but from the bondage of death.

It is this message of life and hope, the good news that is at the heart of the Gospel, that is proclaimed to us whenever we gather for a funeral service – be it a funeral for a person or a funeral for a church. It is the message that even though we acknowledge the reality of death and the pain such a separation causes us when those we love are gone from our sight, we also acknowledge the reality of our faith, that death is not the final word for those who are in Christ Jesus.

- “The tradition of Jerusalem takes its stand on two basic affirmations concerning the human condition: the first is that suffering is real and is the existential lot of ‘fallen’ humanity – ‘All flesh is grass... surely the people is grass.’ The second is that suffering is not the last word about the human condition and therefore that it need not and must not become our preoccupation, the object of our *ultimate* concern; for ‘the Word of our God will stand forever.’ Both of these affirmations must be sustained if we are to be faithful to this tradition.” – Douglas John Hall, *God and Human Suffering*.

As I sat in the pews at St. Peter’s for the last time, I remembered that it was less than a year before the date of the closing service that I was in those same pews for the funeral service for my mother, who died a few days before Christmas in 2008. Even though I had led the funeral service as a pastor on numerous occasions, the words of this familiar liturgy spoke to me in a new way on that day, not as a pastor but as a child who was burying a parent. As I looked upon the flickering light of the paschal candle, I heard anew the words of Paul reminding us that “*when we were baptized into Christ Jesus, we were baptized into his death. We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live a new life.*” (Romans 6:3-4). As her pastor stood beside the casket to offer the prayer of commendation, I was reminded that even as we were commending her into the loving arms of the Lord, he had the assurance that God would “*receive her into the arms of your mercy, into the blessed rest of everlasting peace, and into the glorious company of the*

*saints in light.*” As we buried her next to my father at Lake Nelson Cemetery, my mother’s pastor prayed that God would at the last *“raise her up to share with all the faithful the endless joy and peace won through the glorious resurrection of Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.”* Experiencing the funeral service from the position of a child, I was reminded of the mother of that young man who teaches us the importance of ritual and liturgy in the hour of death:

- “Visitation. Funeral service. Graveside committal. Lunch at the church. These rituals are necessary. The community gathers to acknowledge that one has died, never to be among us again, and to tell mourners, I know this has happened to you and I’m here for you in this time of crisis. I’m here to mourn with you and to hear the gospel, God’s good news; to stand beside you with hope and promise, walking with you as you reenter your world of reality.”

As we remember the faithful departed on this All Saints Day, we may remember the day of their funeral: where it took place, who was present, and what was spoken about the departed. It was a time to remember – both the past that we shared with the one we loved, and the future that God has proclaimed to us in Scripture. As we are called to remember the life we shared with the one who has passed from this life, we are also called to remember the promise that has given people hope in all generations, the promise rooted in the words about the future that we are called to remember:

- “But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: the steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. ‘The LORD is my portion,’ says my soul, ‘therefore I will hope in him.’ The LORD is good to those who wait for him, to the soul that seeks him. It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD.” – Lamentations 3:21-26.

I will always hold the memory of my home congregation dearly in my heart, for it was the place where my faith was nurtured and I learned to trust in God’s steadfast love. But my remembrance of St. Peter’s ministry also points me to the future, for it was through the blessings I received in that place that I am able to be a blessing to others today even as I remember the promises of God that I first learned there: that the day is surely coming when God will gather us together with all those we love, where God will wipe away all of the tears we have shed when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, where as surely as *“goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of our lives,”* we look confidently to that time when with all the saints we too *“will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”*

Amen.