

The Reverend Heather T. Schoenewolf
All Saints Day
November 1, 2009
John 11:32-44
“Called to Life”

Our text this morning drops us right in the middle of a family crisis. A brother has died suddenly; two sisters are left not only with their grief, but with an uncertain future; and the only one who *could have* helped arrives too late to do any good. The lectionary somewhat jarringly introduces us to the scene mid-stream, mid-conversation – in the middle of the mourning, in the middle of a crowd, in the middle of a story that has already taken shape.

But we don't need to go backward – we know the scene. We have seen it on the evening news, and we have seen it in our own lives. A bullet or a fire claims the life of a young person before his time; the phone rings and there has been an accident, and a laundry list of “if only-s” runs through our minds. And sometimes we, like Mary, even turn to God and say, “Where were you when all this happened? If you had gotten here sooner we'd all be ok.”

Our passage this morning takes us straight to the heart of human frailty. The scene we encounter includes all the elements of our human limitation: the pain of suffering, the weight of grief; the power of fear. A sudden sickness has ended in death. Jesus' beloved friend has been laying in a tomb for four days, wrapped in cloths from head to toe. A family – a community – is changed. Life has stopped – not just for Lazarus, but for all of them. **Even Jesus is moved to tears.**

But our passage also bears witness to the powerful reality that is at the heart of the Gospel. For Jesus himself enters into the messiness of the scene. Jesus himself comes face to face with grief as he greets each sister; comes face to face with loss as he stands outside of the tomb and face to face with death as he calls for the stone to be rolled away. But then Jesus takes it further – for the reality of death, of loss, of limitation has no hold on the Lord of Life. At the passage to the tomb he calls upon the power of God and calls Lazarus to life. Defying death at the sound of Christ's voice, Lazarus emerges, still wrapped in his grave cloths. Then Jesus calls once more: commanding the community to tend to Lazarus and to unbind him and set him free.

Like a doctor who comes through the waiting room door and says, “Your loved one is ok. We managed to save him. He's going to be alright,” Jesus breathes new life into his friend Lazarus. At the sound of his voice a man and a community are called to life again.

See, our passage today is a story about **vulnerability**. It's a story that affirms our daily experience: That sometimes life just isn't fair. Sometimes good people hurt; sometimes needs go unmet; sometimes friends don't show up in time; sometimes someone we love dies. And we see a God who in Jesus experiences the breadth of this vulnerability – as a friend weeping outside of Lazarus' tomb. And this story points to the depth of the vulnerability that Jesus will face, for this story is the turning point in John's gospel – this act of saving will lead to Jesus' arrest and his own death on a cross.

But our text for today holds before us another truth, the promise upon which the whole gospel hinges: This text affirms that **God IS a God of life**. The Word through whom God spoke

and created all that is, speaks to us – calling us and all of creation to new life; redemptive life; resurrected life.

God is a God of life – a God who calls us out of the tombs which hold us, out from under the things which hinder and bind us – inviting us to step out into the light of day and *live*. God calls us to life: away from those things which destroy us or kill us: addictions and greed, cruelty and lies; racism and sexism; war and poverty; fear and hate. God calls us to a new way – to that which heals, that which forgives, that which nurtures, that which loves.

And God calls us too to participate in Christ’s life-giving ministry. The call issued at the close of this passage is not just a call to the mourners outside Lazarus’ tomb – but a call to us. “**Unbind him**” Jesus says. Help your brother live again. Help him to shed that which holds him back. Untie the knots that have him all tangled up. Free him that he might have life. And so *we are called too* – to unbind our brothers and sisters from the chains that entrap them. To free them from the bonds of oppression, the bonds of the grudges we hold, the bonds of the identities we impose or the lies we tell. To free them to be who God is calling them to be, that they too might live.

But the deeper joy at the heart of this story is in the truth to which it points – the truth that is our cause for hope today. The story before us today serves a sign to us of Christ’s ultimate victory over death. By enduring death, God in Christ is raised to *new life* – and not merely resuscitated-more-of-the-same life, but *resurrected* life. See Lazarus will die another day. The miracle about which we read would not last forever. He would grow sick and die another day. **But the resurrected Jesus is a new creation.** In *his* dying and rising a gateway to

eternal life has been opened up, Christ’s risen body is one that would never die again. Lazarus emerges from the tomb still wrapped in grave cloths – but when the stone is rolled away on Easter morning, Jesus’ grave cloths are found folded in the tomb, left behind. He has no need for them any longer. Death has no hold on him anymore – and in Christ we are extended the promise of eternal life in him over whom the grave had no hold.

Today we celebrate the feast of All Saints. We remember the faithful departed who have gone before us. We think of those like Mary and Mother Teresa; of Stephen and Andrew; of Paul and Peter; of Priscilla and Joan of Arc and, of Martin Luther and Martin Luther King Jr.. And we may remember those who tucked us in at night with a kiss and a prayer; who read us the story of Christ’s birth on Christmas Eve; who held our hands around a dinner table and prayed; who comforted us when we had teeth pulled or lost pets; who taught us to drive or cheered at our graduations; who watched our children or brought us a meal when we were having rough times; who listened to our problems and helped us find solutions and in doing so showed us the love of Christ.

And today we remember those from among this family of faith: who have read scripture and taught Sunday School; who have served on committees and shaken our hand during the sharing of God’s peace; those who have volunteered in the front office or sung hymns by our side. Those who struggled, just like we do, to live this life to which we are called; who tried to figure out just how to show God’s love in all we do; to be the best we can be, with God’s help. We may grieve a little today that we can’t turn to the right or the left and see them beside us this morning. But we have hope that we will be

reunited with all these saints we have known when we meet again in glory in the life that is to come.

And as we gather at the communion table together, we celebrate that we are united with all of the saints – in all times and in all places – as we await the banquet meal we will share together in heaven.

But remember also this: saints are not just those we remember, those who have gone before, those who are identified as worthy of salvation. Brothers and sisters: ***you too are saints***. You don't have to look into the past to see the lives of the saints. Look within and look around you: ***saints are everywhere***. You, beloved children of God, were called to life by the God who created you; you were claimed by God in your baptism; you were redeemed by the grace of God in Jesus Christ; and you are sustained by the Spirit of the Living God within you. In life and in death we belong to God – a God who has called us here, a God who calls us to life, and a God who calls us to participate with Jesus in his life-giving ministry by freeing others from the chains that bind them. You are God's people. You are saints.

Barbara Brown Taylor writes: "The reality is that all of us who have been baptized are already saints, have already been given our halos, because all it takes to be a saint is to belong to God... You have your identity, your halo, and a choice: to live as who you are or not."

Let us live as God's people. Let us claim our spot among the communion of saints. Let us remember that we too were called to life by a God who loves us, freed to live by a Savior who has redeemed us, inspired to affirm life by a Spirit who strengthens us to share God's good news with a hurting

world. "You have your identity, your halo, and a choice: to live as who you are or not." Amen.