

## A Great Cloud of Witnesses - November 3, 2024

*Note: Please note that these are sermon notes and not a formal manuscript.*

I grew up in what is called a “high” church. Sometimes referred to as “smells and bells”. Because of the pageantry associated with this form of worship, several acolytes were required each week. My friends and I were always ready to suit up and serve. For them it was social (and the best vantage point to see all the cute boys (or girls) sitting out in the nave...but for me, it was a little bit about cute boys but mostly because it was the first flicker in my heart of how right it felt to be at the altar.

In the robbing room, each Sunday, I would look up at the yellowed, seemingly ancient lithograph of a priest standing at a very ornate altar. The bread and wine were elevated, and the heavens was open and filled with faces for as far as the eye could see. The veil between heaven and earth was pulled aside at that moment, and everyone was all together in the celebration of the Eucharist, a word which means “thanksgiving.”

All Saints Sunday is a time to remember this thinness between heaven and earth with special intentionality. It is the occasion we remember those who have gone on before us. Those living in the joy and reality of what Jesus described as a “mansion with many rooms”, or “dwelling places”. The place Jesus returned to prepare for each of us. The writer of Hebrews called this crowd “the great cloud of witnesses” because they are witnesses to the power of God’s presence during their time on earth and also are witnesses to the perpetual beauty of what it means to be in the everlasting arms of God.

In the 90s there was a John Travolta movie titled Michael. He played a comical yet fairly indelicate portrayal of Michael, the Archangel. When Michael came in contact with humans, each person was instantly drawn to him but had a completely different experience of who he was. One thought he smelled like chocolate chip cookies, one said he felt like home. Being in the presence of Michael felt wonderfully unique to each person. Heaven is a little bit like that.

There is a fairly universal desire to imagine what heaven is like but none of us truly know. It is a matter of faith and what The theologian Walter Bruggemann called “holy imagination”.

For me, that image in the robbing room informs my vision of heaven. All that has been and all that is now - together celebrating. It might also be the reason I am drawn to the Mexican

tradition of Altars of Remembrance (offrendas). Pictures, flowers, candles, and food are placed in the center of homes as a reminder we are not alone. Our beloved ones in heaven are still very much a part of our lives. On All Hallows Eve, there are full-scale picnics in cemeteries as a way to commune with the dead literally and figuratively. The call is to hear the whispers of “remember me” in the midst of this thin space. If you have watched the animated movies “Coco” or “the Book of Life”, they have done a great job depicting these traditions.

As we look to election day this coming week, the description of heaven found in scripture brings me hope. It speaks of it as a place where all the ways we separate or categorize ourselves simply do not exist. Race, gender, age, marital status, wealth, physical ability ...all of it will not matter. The new heaven and new earth will be a place where the limited nature of our human-ness passes away and the universal reality is that “all things will be made new”. Not a newness that is the best version of our earthly self, but a newness that transcends our understanding. Tears will be dried and our mourning will be made into song. All will be made right. Jesus talks about this when he offers his teachings in parable form. The Kingdom of Heaven is like... A model for us to make earth a little more like heaven.

When I use these words, they sound as if they are in past tense but they are not. I believe that is why the people who put the lectionary (the weekly reading schedule) together gave us the story of Lazarus. Jesus’ presence in the death of his friends was in real time. John’s Good News isn’t just that Jesus will not only call forth loved ones from the tomb; it’s also that Jesus sees and participates in our grief. Now. The story of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus show a very human Jesus. His grief is real. His divinity did not shield him from that grief and connection. Jesus knew that he himself was called to be the veil between life and death.

The thinness of the veil is beautifully captured by Henry Scott Holland, who served at St. Paul's Cathedral of London during the time of King Edward VII's death in 1910. The sermon he penned included an original poem, titled “Death Is Nothing At All” It is written in the voice of one who has gone on to take their place in the “Great Cloud of Witnesses.”

Death is nothing at all.  
It does not count.  
I have only slipped away into the next room.  
Nothing has happened.

Everything remains exactly as it was.

I am I, and you are you,  
and the old life that we lived so fondly together is untouched, unchanged.  
Whatever we were to each other, that we are still.

Call me by the old familiar name.  
Speak of me in the easy way which you always used.  
Put no difference into your tone.  
Wear no forced air of solemnity or sorrow.

Laugh as we always laughed at the little jokes that we enjoyed together.  
Play, smile, think of me, pray for me.  
Let my name be ever the household word that it always was.  
Let it be spoken without an effort, without the ghost of a shadow upon it.

Life means all that it ever meant.  
It is the same as it ever was.  
There is absolute and unbroken continuity.  
What is this death but a negligible accident?

Why should I be out of mind because I am out of sight?  
I am but waiting for you, for an interval,  
somewhere very near,  
just round the corner.

All is well.  
Nothing is hurt; nothing is lost.  
One brief moment and all will be as it was before.  
How we shall laugh at the trouble of parting when we meet again!

This is particularly alive for me fresh off of the memorial service of Isabelle Murphy yesterday. The burial service is an Easter service in its tone and it contains some of the most lovely prayers contained in *The Book of Common Prayer*. Over and over it reminds us that we are people who continue to make our song. "Alleluia". Each person placed here is a reminder that our song is one of rejoicing. Rejoicing for the life that we shared with them. Borrowing from our Roman Catholic sibling, Pope Francis once said, The saints are not perfect models, but people through whom God has passed... like everyone they breathe air polluted by the evil there is in the world, but on the journey, they never lost sign of Jesus'

roadmap. May it also be true with all of us. In all the noise of this world... with all the messages that do a fairly good job at trying to rob of our spirit, let us remember to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus' roadmap and until we take our place as a beloved member of the Great Cloud of Witnesses on the other side of that thin veil. Praising God with endless Alleluias. Amen.

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