

All Saints' Day Year B: 3 / 4 November 2018

St. James' Episcopal Church, Clinton NY

The Rev. Gary Cyr

**“On this feast of All Saints, as we remember those who’s journey in the life is complete, we pray that their souls and the souls of all the departed may rest in peace and rise in glory.”**

Wisdom of Solomon 3: 1-9

Psalm 24

Revelation 21: 1-6a

John 11: 32-44

*Apatheia* – a Greek word which translates as being without suffering or passion. *Apatheia* is the root of the English word *apathetic*, which means showing no feeling or concern. Basically, no emotions, being indifferent in other words. Reformationist John Calvin argued that any idea or notion that God experiences or shows emotion is simply anthropomorphism: attributing to God human characteristics, feelings being one of those concepts. For Calvin, God is the “unmoved mover” which precludes God from experiencing suffering and loss, and by extension experiencing joy and compassion as well. Through this lens of understanding, God’s divinity is so transcendent that God is beyond perceived feelings.

The opposite of apathetic is to be empathetic: to feel compassion as well as anger. In other words, to feel emotions. Personally, I have to disagree with Calvin. I need a God who I can not only relate to but a God who empathizes with my situation; who is not apathetic. How else can I explain the Incarnation? The Good News of the Incarnation is that in Christ, God enters into the human situation, takes on the human condition and its associated sufferings transforming it through the cross – through Christ’s death and resurrection. It may be selfish of me, but I need a God who can weep with those who mourn and dance with those who celebrate.

Jesus was greatly moved by Lazarus’ death or at least moved by the outpouring of grief he encountered. He was not indifferent to it, and because of it, is moved to demonstrate that God is the author of life and death and that death isn’t the final word. Nothing can separate us from God’s love, mercy, and grace. Not even death. Especially not death.

St. Paul states such in his letter to the Romans, which predates the Johannian Gospel by a generation, when he writes: "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." Death, then, is not the end; only the beginning of a new relationship with God as exemplified by Jesus calling Lazarus out of death into new life. That gives me great comfort on this day as we remember those we love and see no more.

While I lived in Tucson, AZ, I had the opportunity to experience the Mexican celebration *Dia de los Muertos* – the Day of the Dead. At this time of year, the Mexican Christians not only remember their dead loved ones, they celebrate their presence. *Ofrendas* – small altars – are erected in people's homes and churches where family members place pictures and mementos of their deceased loved ones. They also place the favorite foods of those who have died on the altar. *Ofrendas* are not only acts of remembrance, they are an invitation to their dead loved ones to join them at the table for the feast. In some communities, as names of loved ones who have died are read and remembered, the gathering responds *presente* – present. *Dia de los Muertos* isn't just about remembering; it's also about celebrating with those we love and see no more, knowing they are still present with us.

Was that Jesus' intention in his delayed journey to the home of his friends? Would he have prevented Lazarus' death? Reading the full chapter from whence our Gospel's narrative is taken, and we get this idea that Jesus purposely put off going to Lazarus until after he was sure Lazarus had died. Seems like a cruel thing to do if you love someone and know you have the means to make them well. Yet, it appears Jesus wants to use Lazarus' death as a means of communicating the message of eternal life. I find myself having a difficult time reconciling this notion of Jesus' delay with Jesus' being deeply troubled upon his arrival. However, this tension does emphasize the human condition: death is inevitable for all of us. No matter how hard science and medicine try, they can't ward off death. Death will come to each of us: sometimes naturally, sometimes tragically, other times prematurely for whatever reason. Jesus is simply telling his followers that through faith, death doesn't have the final say; that God is the only source of true life, eternal life – the author of our being whose love for us is such that nothing can stand in its way. *Dia de los Muertos* captures and embodies this idea so well.

We gather today to remember those we love and see no more, knowing that their souls rest in God's love. That's what the words from the Wisdom of Solomon impart: that the souls of the righteous abide in God's love, because grace and mercy are upon God's holy ones. This isn't an apathetic God, but an empathetic God. One who knows the fullness of the human condition from joy to sadness. Our God

is not one who eschews pain and suffering, but one who has experienced it through Jesus' life and death and transformed it in the resurrection. Thus, is God Alpha and Omega, our beginning and our ending.

The words read at the beginning of the burial service, also taken from John's Gospel, reminding us of this truth:

"I am the Resurrection and I am life, says the Lord.  
Whoever has faith in me shall have life,  
even though they die.  
And everyone who has life,  
and has committed themselves to me in faith,  
shall not die for ever.

For none of us has life in themselves,  
and none becomes their own master when they die.  
For if we have life, we are alive in the Lord,  
and if we die, we die in the Lord.  
So, then, whether we live or die,  
we are the Lord's possession."

In our baptism, we commit ourselves to Christ are marked as Christ's own, for ever. And nothing can erase that, nor separate us from the promise of resurrected life. Death didn't separate Lazarus from Jesus, nor does death separate us from our loved ones whom we see no longer but remain with us nevertheless. That is God's promise to us in Christ Jesus. On this feast of All Saints, as we remember those who's journey in the life is complete, we pray that their souls and the souls of all the departed may rest in peace and rise in glory.