

Homily: John 11:32-44
Christ Episcopal Church, Valdosta, GA, Sunday, November 7, 2021
The Rev. David W. Perkins, Th.D.

Mary Oliver closes her poem "The Summer Day" with these lines:

**Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?**

[Mary Oliver, "The Summer Day," *New and Selected Poems* (Boston: Beacon, 1992), p. 94]

A loud amen to the first line, yes, we all die at last, and too soon. I thought that last December 10, standing beside the couch where my younger brother, John, lay, breathing his last under the weight of a metastasized pancreatic cancer. I stroked his wavy hair and his cheeks while saying how much prettier he was than I as my finger found his fading pulse in his carotid artery.

Since that day, he has disappeared, like Lazarus, inside a tomb with a stone blocking the entrance. We put our hands on the urn containing his ashes at the farewell service, but as a living presence he had disappeared. Only grave markers and names on memorial garden plaques give visible evidence of a life lived and a story ended.

Death seems even more of an enemy now, the dark terminator of each life story, the grim dissolver of minds with memories held and wisdom gained and the irresistible consumer of physical bodies.

On this All Saints Sunday, when we celebrate our bond with those who have entered that unseen world beyond life, what does this Gospel have to say to us who grapple with all those losses and with our own impending disappearance beyond the veil?

Death and Loss Happen to God's Beloved Ones

No matter how profound our relationship with God, death and the absence of those we love comes to us. Jesus loved Lazarus and spent time in their home. But, death claimed him, as it did my beloved brother, John, someone larger than life in my view.

Stanley Kunitz, American poet, in his profound poem on grieving, “The Layers,” begins with this question. **“How shall the heart be reconciled to its feast of losses?”** [Stanley Kunitz, *The Collected Poems* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000), pp. 217-218.]

The sense of loss can be overwhelming. People fear to mourn in front of others. People fear to cry for fear others will and they will lose control. But, in today’s Gospel, Jesus wept. That somehow gives me permission to be whomever I need to be.

Those who watch often try to help. But—It does not help to theologize about whether death is a penalty for sin or not. It does not help to say, this person is with God, so feel better. It does not help to say “this is God’s will.” Words do not help much, if at all, and sometimes they make things worse. We can take our cue from Jesus. Just be with those who weep, share their pain, and if we speak, focus on the present moment.

In her novel *The Living*, Annie Dillard describes this scene from a funeral for Eustace Honer, who had drowned, trapped under a logjam they were trying to clear on the river.

“Hugh stood with stiff Lulu and supple Bert at the graveside. The Nooksacks stood together with their preacher.

“Before the funeral, in mourning for his father, they had shrieked and pounded on boards...

“At last big-faced Norval Tawes read Scripture and prayed. ‘O Death, where is thy sting?’ Norval Tawes called out, and his little black eyes glittered on Hugh.

“Hugh thought, ‘Just about everywhere, since you ask.’”

[Annie Dillard, *The Living*, (New York: Harper, 1993), pp. 108-109.]

God Often Seems to Be Absent (Jesus’ delay), but is present, suffering with us.

Jesus delayed two days before starting the journey to Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. Why a two day delay. Lazarus would have died anyway, but the extra two days must have been vexing to the sisters. How would Mary and Martha interpret Jesus’ arrival two days after? We, too, have been vexed by God’s delays. How do we respond to unanswered prayers, long weeks and months of grieving? Where is God in our pain?

This story offers us a window into God's nature. The story teller repeats that Jesus was deeply distressed in spirit. Jesus felt vexed in spirit and went beyond that internal chaos into expressing his grief by weeping. God enters into our grieving and sense of loss and shares the pain with us. Not one moment of our pain or sense of loss passes without God's sharing in it. We can imagine God's grief at the death of Jesus. We can imagine God's grief at our absence from God's presence and love. When our loved one dies, God grieves with us and in us and Jesus weeps with us.

The SS hung two Jewish men and a boy before the assembled inhabitants of the camp. The men died quickly but the death struggle of the boy lasted half an hour. "Where is God? Where is he?" a man behind me asked. As the boy, after a long time, was still in agony on the rope, I heard the man cry again, "Where is God now?" and I heard a voice within me answer, "Here he is - he is hanging here on this gallows..."

[Elie Wiesel, *Night*, cited by Dorothee Soelle, "On This Gallows," from *Suffering*. Trans. Everett Kalin. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976)]

Risen Life Is Not Just a Future Possibility

Like Mary and Martha, we tend to look to the future resurrection. "I know he shall rise again at the resurrection on the last day," Martha had said. Again, those kinds of statements and thoughts do make a difference. Knowing we shall be reunited with those we love softens the sense of loss. But, Jesus assures us that resurrection and freedom become possible now. Surely the author of the Gospel wanted his readers to take that away from this story. The risen life of Christ can break the bonds of grieving and set us free for a larger life. Jesus can loose us from the grave clothes of grieving and move us to a less chaotic space.

And, we bring the person we've lost into our present experience with our memories and shared stories. When I share stories of my brother, my Dad, and I squirrel hunting and fishing, it's like they are there with me in the telling. We can write them letters to express the things unsaid, we can write poems and stories about them.

Also, we can weave death and loss into the fabric of our lives and go deeper into ourselves, into God, and into the experiences of others who have suffered loss. The death of our beloved ones can profit us and others. As we embrace death more fully as our future, life becomes richer and more urgent.

"Until we embrace the truth of dying, we are in a trance that dulls us to the wonder of being alive." [Joyce Kornblatt, "The Sacred Task of Grief," *Parabola* 31:4 (Winter 2006):81.]

Or, to put it poetically:

I don't know what God is.

I don't know what death is.

**But I believe they have between them
some fervent and necessary arrangement.**

[From "Sometimes," by Mary Oliver, *Red Bird* (Boston: Beacon, 2008), pp. 35-38]

My Invitation To You

The central message of the Gospel regarding death can be found summarized in today's Eucharistic prayer, Prayer D: **Father, you loved the world so much that in the fullness of time you sent your only Son to be our Savior. Incarnate by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, he lived as one of us, yet without sin. To the poor he proclaimed the good news of salvation; to prisoners, freedom; to the sorrowful, joy. To fulfill your purpose he gave himself up to death; and, rising from the grave, destroyed death, and made the whole creation new.**

[*The Book of Common Prayer: and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church.* (New York: Church Publishing, 1979), p. 374.]

The chaos and loss enveloping us cannot resist God's making all things new. God can make you new today—if you place faith in Christ for the first time, Christ's risen life will break the chains that bind you, as he had Lazarus set free from his grave clothes.

God makes all things new. No matter how secretly and inwardly your faith has shriveled, Christ can make all things new—reawaken faith and purpose and give life energy to live through your feast of losses into a new place.

**I thought my fire was out,
and stirred the ashes . . .**

I burnt my fingers.

[Antonia Machado, *Times Alone: Selected Poems of Antonio Machado*, trans. Robert Bly (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan UP, 1983), p. 151]