

‘Legacy’
Rev. Dr. Ann C. Kemper
November 1, 2015

based on Psalm 24 and John 11:32-44

Before we get too far into this homily, it would be wise to review the context of John’s narrative about raising Lazarus from the dead. This is the final miraculous sign in the Gospel of John before Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem to face his own death and resurrection.

Is it possible to have a more powerful sign of God’s majesty than to bring someone back to life who has been dead for four days?

The story of The Death of Lazarus is a story that symbolically spans all of Jesus’ epic life and ministry. Here in 44 verses, John encapsulates the whole of Jesus’ ministry. I encourage you to find the time in the next few days to read that story closely.

It is an epic story tucked into the much grander sweeping narrative of God’s sovereignty and God’s love for all people. Today’s story is about God’s power over death...physical death in order to give us hope for a future of everlasting light.

I love that about the Bible. Picking out pericopes each week to dissect and apply to today is fine. We need to do that. But the Bible as a whole has an epic story line that has a large scale, sweeping scope and spectacle, transporting the reader to many settings and sub-story lines...all about God.

John Williams composed the musical scores to many epic films: in addition to Star Wars, he wrote the musical scores for ‘Saving Private Ryan’, ‘The Color Purple’, ‘Raiders of the Lost Ark’ and many others.

I think what I would like is for one of those grand musical scores of John Williams to be played in the background as I pass from this life into another...that thin place where I imagine the last thing to fade away is sound.

Last night was All Hallowed Eve. That makes today All Saints Day when we honor the saints who have passed through the thin veil between life and death.

...a place where the gates were lifted up and the King of glory ushered them into a place where they received blessing from the Lord, and vindication from the God of their salvation.

Death is an unknown. I believe it is music that helps to take the fear out of the passing and to also comfort those who mourn.

When John Cmelko, Mark Goodenough and I were sitting with Will Tepper the night before he died, we were talking about what music we would want at our memorial services. Mark had already picked out what he wanted and one of the pieces was Israel Kamakawiwo’ole’s rendition of ‘Somewhere Over the Rainbow and What a Wonderful World.’

Mark found it on his phone and played it for us.

Will heard it! He hadn't moved for hours and was heavily sedated, but when he heard the music he responded. I like to think that song helped usher him into a place of peace.

We don't think of that time nearing death as a pleasant time, and what exactly happens after death is a big unknown. What we do know is that we don't come back. Our loved ones are left to mourn and life seems to move on for those left behind.

Death is the big finality. Jesus had important things to say about death...and we get a clue in today's gospel reading from John.

Today's message reminds us that God is a living God whose power to bring even the dead back to life seems, to us humans,...as impossible. But not for God.

God is a God of resurrection; eternal life; and the inheritance of the faithful among those who live in the light.

This story; about raising Lazarus from the dead substantiates Jesus' earlier claim, "I am the resurrection and the life." You don't have to physiologically understand that statement, but you do need to spiritually believe it.

Today's lesson is a snippet out of a much grander, epic narrative. Lazarus, Mary and Martha were more than followers of Jesus...they were his dear friends...which was why it was so hard to accept that Jesus had let Lazarus die.

When Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead he sealed his own fate as an enemy of those in power.

For the Gospel writer John, raising Lazarus from the dead ushered Jesus into his own life/death/resurrection experience;...transforming him from criminal to savior.

As human beings we struggle with the epic faith it takes to truly believe Jesus is the resurrection and the life and accept what that means for us.

We can get hung up on a discussion about whether or not this story is true...or we can accept it as a story about God's omnipotent power to say 'no' to death, and 'yes' to life...even after four days in a tomb.

As faithful Jesus followers we inherit a legacy: A legacy to help others believe in God's power over death, and loving devotion in life.

What legacy did we inherit that helped us on our faith journeys? My first guess would be music. Hymns and songs and musical scores that help us believe without completely understanding. Music that also comforts and inspires.

In a few moments we will call out names of those who have passed away within the last year...and I'll bet you anything, they all had a favorite song or hymn that helped them along the way.

But the idea of legacy is also a communal one. As a community of faith we must think about what ministry we do now that could grow disciples for many years to come.

Several months ago we adopted a three-pronged approach to disciple-making. We did so because we are convinced our number one, most important, purpose for us as a church (and as individual Jesus followers) is to bring people into a deeper more profound and loving relationship with Jesus...we do that in order to transform the world around us.

It is a very simple methodology that has the potential to produce epic results!

Fortunately for this community of faith, those who went before us left us with a legacy that provided both a structural and financial infrastructure we can utilize to bring people into a deeper relationship with Jesus.

The question is: What legacy do we want to leave our children; their children; and their children's children?

That is the epic question, isn't it? It encompasses generations of faithful followers...those who went before us...and those who will come after us.

Faith, and believing, is a beautiful journey with a stunning rainbow ending.

Thanks be to God! Let us pray:

Prayer of the People and Roll Call of the Dead

Awesome God, we approach the gate to the holy city with trepidation and uncertainty because we confess we struggle with the finality of death.

Help our unbelief.

We seek to be assured that soon and very soon we are going to see the King and discover that the sting of death is no more and love triumphs over fear.

Show your faithful blessings upon us so that we may come to understand the thin place where heaven and earth overlap... where Christ's promise unites those bound by time and those blessed by eternity.

Heaven is here, and earth, and the Church above and below is one.

Convinced of God's awesome power to say no to death and yes to life, we lift to you the names of those saints who have left us not long ago trusting you have escorted them to a place of peace:

[Names read and called out loud of those who passed away within the last year.]

When our days here are accomplished, enable us to die as those who go forth to live, so that living or dying, our life may be in you, and that nothing in life or in death will be able to separate us from your great love in Christ Jesus our Lord.

In Your Son's saving name we pray. Amen.