

A Sermon by the Reverend Elizabeth Bonforte Gardner
The Sunday after All Saints' Day (B)
Sunday, November 4, 2018

Wisdom 3:1-9 | Psalm 24
Revelation 21:1-6a | John 11:32-44

Well, it is almost a running gag – if Elizabeth is preaching then the reading should come from John because we all know she doesn't like John.

And so, in a year dedicated to my beloved Mark, I get yet another opportunity to spend time with metaphorical, mystical John.

But, I confess, I've come to appreciate John's gospel the more time I spend learning and listening to his eyewitness account.

True, we are not really sure who wrote this – in fact, none of the gospel accounts claim any authorship.

So we are left to wonder... is it John the Son of Zebedee?

Or John the Elder?

Or some other John?

We aren't sure.

We do know it is written with a clear purpose: that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah.

Which is why, if we look at the gospel's organization, we see how John cleverly points again and again to Jesus who is real and living and can change your life.

John's gospel is around three foundational pillars - one in the beginning, one in the middle and one at the end – and between these pillars are stories.

The middle pillar is what we hear today - when Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead.

Just before we get to the central core, there is a big block of stories about Jesus's miracles that create increasing controversy with the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem.

But the whole first half of the gospel builds to this, Jesus's greatest miracle – the raising of his friend Lazarus from the dead.

Now, this is the straw that breaks the Jewish Leaders' backs and causes them to put in motion the plan to kill Jesus.

Remember, the Jewish leaders are already furious at Jesus for performing signs that point to his claim that he is the Word, the light, the bread, etc.

That is why Jesus leaves Jerusalem and is not there while his friend, Lazarus, is sick.

Jesus knows that to go near Jerusalem will cost him his life...

But he does go back – essentially sealing his fate.

So why this story today - All Saints' Day?

What or who in this most important of miracles helps us understand what it means to be a saint?

Now, the quick Google search of the word saint gives us this definition: "A saint is a person who is recognized as having an exceptional degree of holiness or likeness or closeness to God."

Maybe if we look closely at some of the characters in the story that might help us.

First there is Martha.

Martha, who tells Jesus she believes her brother would not be dead if he had been there, also tells him she believes he will be raised on the last day.

We see that even in death, Martha finds the promise of resurrection.

Martha is strong and resilient.

She is faithful.

And that faith provides both witness and encouragement for her friends and family.

It is Martha who, just a few verses earlier, tells Jesus that even though he didn't prevent her brother from dying, she believes that he is the Messiah. (John 11:24, 27)¹

There is her sister, Mary.

Mary is overwhelmed with grief and cries out to Jesus, "if you had been here then..."

Haven't we all done that at one time or another?

What about Lazarus?

Lazarus shows others the promise of Jesus.

Lazarus reminds those who doubt and wonder that we can come through the most difficult of circumstances – particularly if we lean on Jesus.

Those are all important characters and characteristics: Mary's hopelessness, Martha's encouragement, Lazarus's rebirth.

But are they saintly?

I wonder if we don't look more closely at another character in the story: the crowd.

Jesus commands the crowd: "Unbind him, and let him go!"²

¹ "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

² John 11:44

This is the part of the story that reminds us that God's work – even God's work of resurrection – requires our participation.

Not because God needs our help.

But rather because we need to be a part of what God is doing.

Put another way, God's life-giving work of creation and rebirth isn't limited just to the one who is being raised.

It also impacts and transforms all of us who witness it.

In a book we use to honor saints throughout the year, it tells us:

The word "saints" is used to describe the entire membership of the Christian community in the New Testament.³

But eventually, that day became a day for remembering just those saints as defined by Google.

The ones who did heroic deeds or were more holy than the rest of us.

And so the church created All Souls' Day – an entirely new day to remember the rest of us, the crowd.

I know I identify with Mary's overwhelming grief sometimes but I've never used it to do something so holy as to call it saintly.

I know I've been resilient like Martha and believed when it seemed crazy to keep the faith, but I didn't feel like a saint.

And I remember times when I've felt totally reborn – brand new and a witness to God's overpowering love.

But I never felt like I could call any of those moments saint-like.

In fact, when I see examples of those who seem to me to be saints, I feel less and less like one.

Last weekend while we were visiting our daughter, my husband, Chris, and I walked through the college's Student Union.

Inside there is a big banner that reads, "We will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends."

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said that.

The banner was there when we visited for Annie's interview.

It was there when we picked her up at the end of her freshman year.

And it is still up there now.

³ *Lesser Feasts and Fasts*, Church Publishing, 2006.

The problem with that banner, for me, is not that it even needs to be up at all – which, of course, is a problem.

The problem with that banner is that it makes me stand in awe of the profound wisdom and courage of those words.

And then it makes me remember other amazing words people have spoken.

Like St. Clare: “We become what we love and who we love shapes what we become.”

And St. Catherine of Siena: “Be who God meant you to be and you will set the world on fire.”

And St. Theresa: “The world does not need what you have but who you are.”

The reason it bothers me to remember these quotes is that I know that if someone were to quote me they might only remember me saying, “I’m going to the grocery store... can I get you anything?”

That troubles me.

Until...

I remember the crowd is just as important to this story as Mary and Martha and Lazarus.

Until I realize it is up to me – and you – to unbind those who are wrapped up in fear and death and release them to know new life.

Until I remember All Saints Day is for all of us – the great cloud of witnesses – the crowd.

I’m not going to get into a debate as to whether or not the Church should have two days of remembrance because if I did, I would prefer All Souls to All Saints – which is not good if you’re a priest.

But I will say I’m grateful the Church took the extra step to ensure we remain part of the story.

Because if the only ones we remember were those whose lives and words and witness are deemed exceptional or heroic, well, then I don’t think we would be honoring God at all.

I think God is in the messy, gritty, day-to-day stuff we all do.

In the contracts and policies we create to help one another honor each other’s gifts.

In the teams and offices we lead with honor and integrity.

In the art we create to make the world a more beautiful place.

In the houses we sell so families can begin a new chapter in their lives.

In the tending and mending of minds, bodies, and relationships.

In the working to bring safety and sanctuary to our neighborhoods.

And even in the laundry, and the carpools, and the grocery store runs.

Jesus says to the crowd, “Unbind him, and let him go!”

This might be an invitation to you out there in the crowd.

It could be God calling you to participate, in some way, in God's loving, liberating, and life-giving work.

We may not see what we do as heroic or saintly.

But if we stand for love and promise and hope and resurrection in our everyday lives, then we are what the New Testament calls saints.

So we give thanks for the saints who went before us.

We remember and grieve and celebrate those that are now nearer to God.

We turn our attention to those saints sitting with us today, in particular the newest saint, Elsbeth, who will be baptized in a few minutes, and recognize the saints who live and work alongside us.

With God's help we try to unbind those who might be strangled by fear.

We try to release those who are imprisoned by despair.

We try bring light into those dark tombs where we've all found ourselves at one time or another.

It is actually quite exciting to think that the God who created heaven and earth wants to partner with you and me.

I find so much hope in knowing that the God who raised Jesus from the dead needs me, needs us...

Our God wants us to be part of resurrection, life, grace, and power... right here and right now.

Dr. King also said, "If I cannot do great things, I can do small things in a great way."

On this day where we remember all the saints, let's do saintly things, however small, to bring about the great Kingdom of God.