

Dear friends at Zion, thank you for kind welcome and hospitality. I bring you greetings and gratitude on behalf of St. John’s residents, Board leaders and staff for the mutual support we share – providing care and services to some of your church members and you providing care for St. John’s through prayerful gifts of grace.

Zion Lutheran, as many of you know, is one of 25 St. John’s ownership congregations on whose behalf we seek to deliver an array of human services spanning the arc of life within communities of Hamilton, Red Lodge, Laurel and Billings; in each place a common mission of *providing living opportunities with nurturing environments of hope, dignity and love.*

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Speaking of things in common . . . there is a common word present within our biblical readings for this All Saints Sunday. The word, tears.

From the prophet Isaiah, who was concerned about a people soon to be bound into exile, a promise is declared that “. . . the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces” (25:8) From the Book of Revelation the Seer, John, declares a future hope for all of creation that includes a day yet to come when God will wipe “every tear” from human eyes (21:4) And from the gospel of John we read of many tears when a friend of Jesus dies (John 11).

We are accustomed to human tears, of course. We all share that in common. We can scarcely imagine life without them. We each enter this world crying and, when we are hungry or wet or not held enough – no matter how old we are – we cry.

Tears may come unbidden when we are stirred or inspired by beauty, art, music or simply by someone’s kindness. We sometimes cry over a pleasing story or a sad story; a movie with a happy ending or one with a tragic ending. We cry over onions at the kitchen counter; and may even shed a tear over something as simple as a touching Hallmark commercial.

Graduations and special celebrations, such as baptisms that we will witness this morning, may prompt our tears of gladness. The same is true at weddings. We cry with happiness at seeing a young couple starting out together, although parents may shed bittersweet tears at “letting go” of a daughter or a son who sets off to join life with another.

While some of our tears in life are those prompted by joy or gladness, other are prompted by opposite emotion.

In Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania this week, the tears of a mourning community joined to create a river of grief following the shooting death of 11 worshipers within Tree of Life Synagogue. These are the kind of human tears that will flow for a long in time and may be as far reaching as a lifespan.

In Indonesia this same week, next of kin to the 189 passengers and crew aboard Lion Air Flight JT610 are flooded with grief while waiting for questions of what happened yet to be answered. For those folks also, tears of grief will flow long in time and reach.

In earlier weeks, we saw news stories and videos from Florida and the Carolinas in wake of potent storms that claimed lives, property, belongings and means to make a living. Tears of loss were present there also, even amidst kind assistance from so many.

Within the biblical book of Ecclesiastes (Chapter 3) the one who is called the Teacher, writes: For everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven:

A time to be born, and a time to die;
A time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;
A time to kill and a time to heal;
A time to break down, and a time to build up;
A time to weep, and a time to laugh;
A time to mourn, and a time to dance.

As we and all saints of God live year upon year, turning our calendars, we discover that what the Teacher writes in that good book to be true. The seasons for saints on earth are not always the same; not perfectly fitting to our desires; and certainly not predictable. The years and experiences within life seasons are fluid and flowing between the poles of what is preferred and what is not preferred; what is pleasing and what is disappointing; all yoked with a good portion of mystery along the way.

In John's story this morning we come upon a "preferred not" scene, as well as a scene of surprising mystery. Jesus is found to be at a funeral within a graveyard, where there are more than enough tears to go around. Mary and Martha are weeping, their grief new and raw at the death of their brother, Lazarus. John reports a good portion of the town being reduced to tears.

When Jesus sees the tears of the people he becomes "greatly disturbed in spirit," "deeply moved" and begins to weep, himself. We see in Jesus' tears a reflection of the one he intimately calls Father. His lament reflects God's lament over human preferred-nots, disappointments, and losses. As Robert Kysar¹ notes, we see in Jesus the God who suffers when God's creation suffers. Although God is not seen with our eyes, word from the book of Revelation this morning tells that the home of God is among mortals, and that God dwells with them . . . with us (Revelation 21:3). God is for and with all the saints.

Those who witnessed Jesus' reaction to the death of Lazarus wondered, after observing his prior miraculous activities, why he had not prevented his friend's death in this instance. No answer is supplied. The season of a "time to die" had come to Lazarus. In response, Jesus goes to the tomb, a cave with stone already set in place. In Jesus' presence and word at that entrance, a mystery arrives also.

Neither stone nor stench can deter Jesus, or keep Lazarus a prisoner therein. "Come out of that dark cave," Jesus says to Lazarus, and the dead man came out. His hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his faced wrapped in cloth. Jesus calls upon the people to unbind Lazarus, and to let him go. A scene that invites people of every time and place to consider

¹ Robert Kysar in Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament – John.

those realities that are binding to their own lives in the present, and from which God seeks to set them free. To free us.

“Unbind him, and let him go!” Author David Lose² comments that Jesus’ command is an invitation to now be drawn into God’s life-giving work in the world today . . . to participate in, extend, and in some sense complete the reach of God’s mighty acts. It is a promise that resurrection is not simply a matter of “then” – whenever that might be – but is also and equally a matter of “now.” Now there is something for you to do. Now, a way for you to make a difference. Now, the time to lean in to the winds of fear and forces. Now, to sense God’s promise of life helping us not only live in the shadow of death with confidence, but also to resist those wrongs, those voices and influences that we sometimes concede to, too quickly.

In John’s story, this funeral scene becomes a sign that the last day, the day of resurrection, has already come to earth in Jesus. Some in the cemetery who watched old Lazarus walk out of the grave probably read the sign rightly and trusted in faith. Others may have experienced the scene as confusion or threat, adding one more reason as to why Jesus would soon, in the story’s telling, be forced into his own grave.

All Saints may call to your mind, as it does to mine, particular beloved faces, names and memories of the past. That is one of the beauties and riches of this day. To pause and recall those dearest . . . even naming, as we will do this morning, loved ones who have died this past year. Always, so poignant.

All Saints, creating a space to honor and give thanks for those who rest eternal in God’s safe keeping, while also stirring us to pray for those living saints, including the most newly baptized.

All Saints, a door open within God’s home for all; a place at God’s table with plenty of grace to go around; a holy gathering and Holy Communion, which even this morning we taste and see. In earlier pages the book of Revelation describes the Assembly of God’s saints as “a number no one could count” with saints “from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages” (7:9)

All saints, a day and reality that brings into focus our own loved ones while also stretching our imagination toward the whole company of saints, more diverse and populous than can be fully comprehended. God with the saints – with us. Full inclusion with some intentional exclusions: “Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more” (Revelation 21:4). Plus, the Creator of all, who raised Lazarus and who will raise you, seated on the throne, saying, “See, I am making all things new” (Revelation 21:5).

² David Lose, In the Meantime. <http://www.davidlose.net/2018/10/all-saints-b-saints-here-and-now/>. Posted October 30, 2018. Paraphrased and enhanced.