

Rev. Phil Blackwell • November 1, 2015 • Sermon Text
Revelation 21:1-6a, John 11:32-44



First United
Methodist Church

DOWNTOWN FOR GOOD

203 Wisconsin Avenue | Madison, WI 53703

608-256-9061 | www.fumc.org

I was rummaging through some papers, looking for something that I never found, but I did find this, a notebook in which I wrote my experience of my dad's death on St. Patrick's Day, 1994. Dad had cancer and was living with us; he died in his room in our home. Mom had died ten months earlier, and he had seen her through lovingly until the end. Now, it was his end. It was late at night, I remember.

"I was standing at the side of the bed when Dad died. His breathing was shallow but regular. And then, he just stopped. The next breath did not come. I looked down at him, and I saw with my mind's eye a bird lift off from Dad and fly up; I saw it at the top of my field of vision as I looked down. The bird was diaphanous, visible but not solid. It was large, with a wing-span of at least two and a half to three feet. The wings were tapered. It had the presence of an eagle. It was a beautiful, freeing, affirming moment. Was it Dad's "spirit" soaring toward heaven? Was it my burdens being lifted off my shoulders? Did I see a real bird? No, but I really saw a bird."

I am not a visionary; that was the only vision I have ever seen, but it was a wonderful gift. I could psychoanalyze it; some of you already have. I could poeticize it; that is what old English majors do. I could theologize on it, and just might for a moment. But the power for me is preserved by just leaving it as it was, and still is, an affirmation of the goodness of life even in the moment of death.

John, the mystic who saw visions of all sorts that he recorded for us in the Book of Revelation, saw a new heaven and a new earth. It was a time of great upheaval and uncertainty in the middle earth surrounding Jerusalem, but he caught a glimpse of what was possible in the future. Notice that it is not a vision of escape, that God will swoop down and steal away all of the good people, the saints, and scurry them up to heaven far from earth. No, God's future comes down to us right here on earth, right now in the middle of our lives, here and now, a time when our tears will be wiped away and we will see a future of new possibilities. "Look, I am making all things new," proclaims the loud voice from the throne to John. I only saw a bird, but that was enough, enough to keep me going.

And I needed it. I turned the page of my notebook and read my notes about the next days and weeks and months, for it went on for a long time. Profound sorrow over irretrievable losses . . . both Mom and Dad dead within months of each other. People said to me, "Oh, you must feel like an orphan now," and I thought but did not say, "Must I? I don't. What I feel is lost. I feel like I am guiding a ship by the stars at night, wanting to follow the North Star, but a terrible shroud has enveloped me and I cannot find my way." "Home" for me was not a house but wherever Mom and Dad were, and they had been there for me since the creation of the earth, for all I knew. But, now they were nowhere that I could go, except inward.

Inward can be a scary place to go. Panic, dread, grief, hopelessness, despair, dullness, paranoia, depression. Sorrow is powerful, and it will not go away. It is the corollary of love. In her Shakespearean innocence, Juliet says to Romeo, "Good night, good night! Parting is such sweet sorrow, that I shall say goodnight till it be morrow." (Act 2, Sc.2, l.176 ff) But parting by death takes the sweetness away, at least at the start.

Jesus weeps, along with Mary and Martha. Lazarus has died, the brother of the two women and a dear friend of the Savior of the World. Mary asks Jesus, "What kind of savior are you that you cannot save the life of our dear Lazarus? Where were you when we needed you?" That is not an uncommon question for us to be asking God from time to time. "Where were you when I needed you?"

In the depth of his sorrow, Jesus does something that you and I cannot do – he brings Lazarus back to life. This is not a parlor trick. He was not using the death and burial of Lazarus as a set-up for making himself look good, though it does have that effect. He does what he, and what only he, can do; he acts in such a way as to affirm life. He commands Lazarus to come out of the tomb, and a dead man lives. "Unbind him and let him go." It is an affirmation of this life here and now, just as the vision of the new heaven and new earth coming down to form the new Jerusalem right before our very eyes validates this life. Lazarus is not swept up into heaven with the angels singing. This is not a resurrection, but a resuscitation. He is returned to this life, yet to die again some day.

But this life is good, good enough to embrace, to keep on living it, to make the most of it. There are gifts great and small each day that tinge our sorrow with sweetness, even as we mourn the deaths of those whom we love.

Today in the life of this congregation we name nineteen people who have died since All Saints Day last year. Nineteen. Some of us knew some of them. Perhaps, there are members who knew all of them. Take

comfort, if you knew none of them, that you are not alone today. But they are representative of a much larger list of names we carry in our minds and hearts, that great “cloud of witnesses,” we say, who have lived lives of goodness and compassion and generosity and justice and love which have inspired us to see new visions, to see what is possible, even for us.

A “saint” is someone whom we see living out his or her faith in daily life, and we say, “I want to be like that.” Sainthood is not something someone achieves by living a virtuous life; it is something God grants so that we might envision what is valuable in life. A saint is a vision of God’s presence in flesh and blood.

Venerating the saints has never been central to the Protestant culture of Christianity. We will casually grant sainthood to the gospel writers, St. Matthew, St. Mark, St. Luke, and St. John. We will concede sainthood to Mary, the mother of Jesus. But we do not make a focused attempt to identify miracle workers in our history and confer special influence to them. But truthfully, we are not far from that when we celebrate All Saints Day today and name the names we have listed before us, for in these people we have caught a glimpse of the goodness God has given to us. And when we end the reading of these names, there will be a silence when each one of us can offer additional names to God, those for whom we give thanks, even in our sweet sorrow. They need not have been perfect for God to have put them to good use in our lives. My Dad and Mom will be among them; I will name even my brother, Dave.

Last night, All Hallows Eve, Halloween, traditionally was a time to make the world holy. I suspect that was lost on some of the revelers in our neighborhood celebrating Freakfest, but it was a night to chase away all that is bad in order to make room for what is good. It was a time to create space for all that is holy to come near.

Today, we name those in whom God has come near in the here and now, with the glorious vision given to us that there are even greater things to come. So, with thanksgiving, and tears, and visions of a new heaven and a new earth and of soaring birds, let us hear the names of the saints: Arol Soderholm...

Bonnie Landgraf...Mary Jo Thieleke...Delores Pitas...Margaret James...Jean Shoemaker...

Arlene Reese...Russell Hovde...Marjorie Detroy...Larry Ewing...Jean Morgan...Terry Riddle...

John Thomas...Gloria Waity...Del Walton...Frances Hauser...Donna Turner...James Christensen...

Sandi Einerson.