

Pastor's Message – 11/3/24
All Saints'
Revelation 21:1-6; Isaiah 1:6-9; John 11:32-44

I told the story a few weeks ago, but it fits into today's Bible readings also. You might remember me telling the story that, back in the days of old-fashioned traveling circuses, animals were not always cared for in a humane fashion. In the case of one particularly impoverished circus, the animals were kept in tiny cages.

One bear, in particular, lived in a nine-foot-by-nine-foot cage. He was never let out. His purpose was simply to sit there in his cage, near the entrance to the fairgrounds where the circus was performing. He was a sort of living billboard.

The circus eventually went bankrupt, and the animals dispersed to various zoos. The bear was sent to a wonderful zoo, one where the animals' quarters resembled their natural habitat. There were no cages in this zoo. There were barriers, of course, to protect zoo patrons from the animals, but they were unobtrusive and blended into the natural surroundings.

This unfortunate bear had been in his cage too long. Even though he was free to wander the large, vegetation-filled enclosure, he never ventured beyond a nine-foot-by-nine-foot area.

This bear had a ceiling problem.

Our Bible reading from John 11 today declares Jesus' power over physical death. Everything in this story indicates that Lazarus was truly dead. His sisters and the neighbors mourn. Martha reminds Jesus, that, Lazarus being dead for four days, there would be the smell of his decaying flesh emanating from the tomb where his body had been laid. Mary and Martha (in other gospels) each tell him if Jesus had been there Lazarus would not have died. Skeptical onlookers consider his death proof positive that Jesus is not as powerful as his reputation might make him seem.

When Jesus issues the command to roll away the stone, and then, when Lazarus comes from the tomb, to unbind him and let him go, the skeptics could now have no doubt about what had happened.

The story tells us that Jesus had no ceiling problem. He knew that death was not the end and death had no power. Jesus clearly had a "Think outside of the grave" mentality. He saw beyond . . .

- the notion that the limited view of life we see is all that there is;
- the assumption that we should satisfy ourselves in whatever way we can because "you only go around once";
- the idea that individuals don't matter in the overall scheme of things;
- the belief that "when our number's up, it's all over" and the belief that nothing much ever really changes.

Against all of that, Jesus comes along and says, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live."

That's high-ceiling thinking!

Of course, it's pretty hard for us to focus on high-flying concepts like resurrection when we are up to our ears in the "same-ol," "same-ol" of life. But we all understand the concept

here, although we're more likely to use phrases like "Think outside the box," or, as in the case of Taco Bell executives who wanted us to get past the idea that fast food meant cheeseburgers and fries. Thus, "Outside the bun."

Let's go back to John's story. Jesus' question to Martha at verse 26 remains his question to all of us. "Do you believe this?" We all have doubts; we all wrestle with faith. We all have doubts about . . .

a real ark filled with smelly animals which lead to ...

- Doubts about a real dry land crossing at the Red Sea, which lead to ...

- Doubts about the walls of Jericho falling down at the sound of trumpets, which lead to ...

- Doubts about God's active involvement in the life of Israel, which lead to ...

- Doubts about God's new covenant in the person of Jesus Christ, which lead to ...

- Doubts about the place of Jesus in history, which lead to ...

- Doubts about the relevance of the Bible itself in the AI-paced world of the 21st century.

But at some point, in the midst of our doubts, we have to take a stand and believe, or not believe, the promises of God. What is it to which you can stand up and boldly say "I believe"? The Bible is full of the most extravagant promises. Do you read those texts and nod, asserting that "I do believe this"?

Do you believe that ... The same spirit that worked wonders at Pentecost dwells in you today?

Do you believe that ... You can do all things through Christ who strengthens you? (Philippians 4:13)

Do you believe that ... You can do exceedingly, abundantly, above all that you can ask or think? (Ephesians 3:20)

Do you believe that ... To as many as received him, to them he gave power, even to become the sons and daughters of God? (John 1:12)

Do you believe that ... The resurrection power that raised Lazarus from the dead can be at work in you today?

Is there anyone here this morning who will act on what they believe?

In both its original form and Christian understandings now, the stories of the Great Banquet in our reading from Isaiah *then* are intended to evoke a response from us *now*. They call us beyond a vision of the world narrowed by disease, deprivation and hostility and divisiveness, toward the realization that God's promise and God's presence already enable a far richer feast with far more people, along with a narrowing of death's power now, than we may normally imagine.

Isaiah 25 prophesies a day when the temple mount would be host to a lavish feast with rich foods and the best wines for all peoples of the earth. From that day forward death would be abolished forever, and the disgrace of the Covenant people would be removed.

The North American cultural imagination is deeply focused on the here and now as the only ultimate there is. At the same time, it bombards us with a vision of the utter meaninglessness and futility of any vision of the whole sweep of history, human or cosmic, and

tends to reject any discussion of “the age to come” as a kind of meaningless if not damaging “pie in the sky by and by” wish-fulfillment-complex.

We have some work to do. Addressing issues of mortality and time as the Bible and Christian tradition have continued to do over the centuries may now require significant intellectual effort for many in our congregations. Perhaps the church has not been clear enough about its proclamation. Or perhaps we have withdrawn into our own safer cocoons in the face of the onslaught of significant cultural and intellectual challenge to our teaching.

Today of all days is a time for us to burst the cocoon and to see, experience and embrace the butterfly that may emerge when we believe the fullness of the Christian proclamation of the kingdom of God now and the age yet to come. At the heart of all three readings for All Saints’ Day is the affirmation that God’s future happens here and now and in all kinds of ways.

Most people enjoy a good party. A good party brings people together in an atmosphere that allows them to relax, to meet good friends, to share life's experiences, and then to go home feeling the evening was worthwhile. Behind the party, it takes a lot of work to make that happen. First, there needs to be the decision to have the party. Second, there needs to be careful thought concerning who will be invited. Third, the menu needs to be considered. Fourth, there is the work of choosing the right cracker, the best meats and fish, the proper desserts, the richest coffee, and the finest liquid refreshments. The host's care for such details produces an excellent experience for guests.

Heaven is often described as a party or banquet feast. Isaiah tells us that God has decided to have a party. The guest list has been chosen and we are all invited. The food and drink have been carefully selected. God, our host, has cared for every detail so that we will delight in the life we live in the Kingdom of God.

God makes His home with men and woman: right here and right now and in every age. I imagine that most churchgoers expect to go to heaven and assume that they will be eternally happy there. Perhaps they will enjoy it, but sometimes I wonder. For some, their body language contradicts their words, for they are restless in God's presence. They can barely spare sixty minutes a week to praise him. They squirm when the church clock ticks off more than an hour. I have led worship in churches which had later worship times and for some of the churchgoers in those churches, if the church service ran long, the worry of missing the kickoff made it close to impossible to commit themselves to worship, let alone fathom an eternity praising God?

It is time for us to praise God with all that we are and all that we have. It is time to praise God as if we had a thousand tongues to sing. Churches are not always very good at celebrating God’s presence and God’s grace. Organizational structures of the church can be pretty grim. Not much celebrating or joy in committee and board meetings. In our meetings, we usually talk about money and worry about the future of the church.

And I totally sympathize with the discontinuity between getting such business done and the vision of the Bible. It just doesn't seem to match. I mean, really, if you want to get something done, don't just pray about it. Agendas tend to dissolve in the face of prayer. Our budgets tend to get weird when we let the Holy Spirit in.

The Bible's vision of the kingdom of God has never been a committee meeting, unless there are really good refreshments and lots of laughter, in other words a party. Isaiah understood this. Just read the scripture. God's promise is not grim, it's a blast.

What would the world come to if we stopped keeping track of... well, you know. I don't advocate for the abolition of management. I do advocate for Joy, Glory, Song, Fellowship, and according to Isaiah "a rich feast, a feast of choice wines ..." Let's stop being so careful and worried and afraid and "rejoice in God's salvation." Attendance might improve. We might have fun. People might want to come to church, be in church and stay in church instead of going to their own homes.

Maybe its time for a committee dedicated to hosting parties in this church that will organize, plan, and put on parties. The church should be about celebrating, praising and thanking God for who He is, what He has done and the great things He still has yet to do. It's time to stop focusing on what we don't have and focus on what God has already provided. It's time to focus on what we can do by God's grace instead of what we worry we can't do.

When you stand at the Pearly Gates, would you rather be told you believed too much or you believed too little?

When you stand at the Pearly Gates, would you rather be told you cared too much or you cared too little?

When you stand at the Pearly Gates, would you rather be told you tried too hard or you didn't try hard enough?

When you stand at the Pearly Gates, would you rather be told you were too forgiving or you were too judgmental?

When you stand at the Pearly Gates, would you rather be told, "Well done, thou hyper-hopeful and risk-taking servant," or "Well done, thou sober and play-it-safe servant"?

If we are to be truly alive in our faith in the risen Jesus Christ, we need to throw off the restrictive clothing of the grave. We may be physically alive, but spiritually dead if we do not recognize that there is more to life than what can be perceived through our physical nature. Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead and has promised life for us as well.

The end is near: the end of tears, the end of death, the end of crying, the end of pain. God is throwing a party for all who will come in. And what a party it's going to be. O for a thousand tongues to sing our great redeemer's praise! No more fear; death is defeated.

A few theological seminary students were playing basketball in a local gym. The janitor arrived to lock up for the night. Since the young men were not finished playing, the janitor sat down and began to read his Bible. When the game was over one of the students leaving the gym noticed the man was reading the Book of Revelation. Jokingly, he asked him if he understood what he was reading. The man replied that he did understand what he was reading. Jolted by the janitor's confidence, when he himself was having trouble understanding this last book of the New Testament, he asked further: "What does the book mean?" "Simple," the janitor replied, "Jesus wins."

That's outside the box thinking; that's outside the grave mentality; that's a no ceiling mentality; that's life without limits.