

Sermon for November 1, 2009

All Saints' Year B

November 1 and 2 are busy days for many Christians. These are the Days of the Dead.

In Haiti, some spent last night and will spend tonight in all night drumming sessions in graveyards, meant to summon the dead and their voodoo leader, a figure called Baron Samedi, to come and enjoy the All Saints' festivities.

Most of those who engaged in a little voodoo last night are in church today, being faithful Catholics for rites of Baptism and Eucharist much like ours.

In the Philippines, tombs are cleaned or repainted, candles are lit, and flowers are offered.

Entire families camp in cemeteries, and sometimes spend a night or two near their relatives' tombs.

Card games, eating, drinking, singing and dancing are common activities in the cemetery.

I am reminded of the dinner on the grounds and cemetery clean-up that my family in west Tennessee practices on the third Sunday in May, what we called Decoration Day.

And indeed, right here in Greenwood, some of our neighbors from Mexico are observing a Day of the Dead that is rooted in the practices of the Aztecs.

They are building private altars in their homes here and sending gifts for their relatives in Mexico to place on the graves of their ancestors; sweet things, tasty breads, mezcal and tequila.

They hope that the curtain or wall that divides the living from the dead is pulled back today, so that they enjoy something of the communion that they once had with those they love but see no more.

Such is the hope of the Day of the Dead.

But, friends, shall we not observe a Day of the Living instead?

I hear in the lessons appointed today a solemn reminder that as much as we enjoy the remembrance of the dead on All Saints, our local dead and the holy, saintly dead, today is a little Easter, thoughtfully placed for us in the fall, meant to enshrine in the season of shortening days and falling leaves the Resurrection hope of the eternally living.

While death seems so real to us, God's will is to life.

And because God is going to win in the end, life, abundant, rich, full, perfect life, will be the supremely triumphant attribute of the new creation.

We and our brothers and sisters in the Catholic lands are all tempted to give up on life, to try to find a way to celebrate death, or to give death too much power over us and think its reign will be forever.

But it is only the foolish, Solomon's wisdom says, who regard the dead as dead forever, in the eternal punishment of some underworld.

No, that book says, like sparks from a banked up campfire, they will come back to life.

The divine spark at the core of a human's being cannot be finally extinguished.

The reason that death is not really real, not eternally real, the reason that death is not forever, is that God shared in our horror over death and determined to defeat it through the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus.

If I ever preach Jesus up to you so much that you lose track of his humanity, turn back to this 11th chapter of the Gospel of John.

And here wonder how Jesus' obvious human grief must also reveal the heart of God looking at the apparent power of death in the world.

Jesus looked at the tear-stained faces of Mary of Bethany and of her neighbors and was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.

In the Greek phrase, there is a shadow of anger to the word used. Jesus was sad and angry about the power of death over his friend.

He wept, we are told.

When else, can I ask you, did Jesus weep in the New Testament, when else but at the Cross, when he again faced death straight in the face and his humanity and divinity were both deeply affected by that terrible power?

Greatly disturbed, he was indeed, as we are when we look death in the face and give up the field to its power.

But Jesus Christ stayed and fought and defeated death in the Resurrection.

In the passage we just read, we hear Mary's words to Jesus that are both an accusation of negligence and a confession of faith, "Lord, if you had only been here, my brother would not have died."

Her sister Martha said the same thing to him a few verses before, just before our appointed passage began.

That earlier accusation provided a teaching moment to the Lord and to us.

Looking into Martha's grief-stricken face, he said "Your brother **will** rise again." The future tense.

She replied, perhaps with a little exasperation, as you might feel at family funeral when you are assured that so-and-so is in a better place, "I know that he **will** rise again on the last day." Again the future tense.

Is she saying, as we know, that the future tense resurrection is only so much comfort in the face of the soul-shaking power of death?

But the Lord Jesus replied in the **present** tense, saying "I **am** the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, though they die will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die."

The Resurrection **is** here, Jesus said. It **is** begun; it is in me.

Death already isn't the final reality any more. Life is the final reality.

Today is not the Day of the Dead. It is the Day of the Living; of we who live

in Jesus on this side of the grave and of those who live on the other side.

Remember, the living does not stop. Remember it on All Saints' Day and Easter, remember it when you are preparing to mourn for parents, your spouse, your friends, remember, it is the Day of the Living even when you prepare to breathe your last breath.

We have nothing to fear. Christ Jesus has won us the victory.