

My Lord, What a Mourning! My Lord, What a Morning!

Revelation 7:9-17

Matthew 5:1-12

“Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.”

On this Sunday when we celebrate All Saints’ Day, you and I were met, once again, with the names, ages and death dates of those who have been through the great ordeal, as the Elder John put it, and are now in that multitude that no one can count. The Memorial to the Lost remembers 233 souls shot in Philadelphia in 2016. Presently over 270 souls have been shot and killed in 2017. Moreover last night, six actors and their director helped us remember twenty children and six teachers murdered at Sandy Hook Elementary School. My Lord, what a mourning!

In a few minutes, when we gather at the Lord’s Table to remember our Lord’s death until he comes again, we will remember nine saints of the Church Militant in Chestnut Hill who are also in that great multitude no one can number as well as family and friends who join them in the Church Triumphant. My Lord, what a mourning!

Following the closing voluntary, Souls Shot will surround us in Widener Hall, portraits created by twenty-one artists matched with twenty-one families that have had a loved one’s life ended or tragically altered by a bullet. Finally, this afternoon and in memory of all these, the Gallery Choir will perform Mozart’s *Requiem*, James MacMillan’s *A Child’s Prayer* and Lewis Spratlan’s *Unspoken Words*. My Lord, what a mourning!

How in the world, how in the middle of times such as these, can you and I celebrate on a Sunday morning when we are surrounded, before and behind, by so much death? The answer, I do believe, has something to do with the end of the story whose beginning we have been telling each other for months. Actually the reading for the Sunday *after* All Saints’ Day in the lectionary continues the story of God’s people crossing over the Jordan River, water parting at the end of their sojourn just as God had parted the Red Sea in the beginning. No doubt they imagined life would be all milk and honey once they were out of the wilderness. It is what we imagine too: when I leave home, when I land the perfect job, when I meet my soulmate, when we buy the bigger house, when the tax bill is passed, when my party is in power, when the children are grown, when we finally retire. We are always mistaking our proximate hopes for our final destination, thinking if we can just make it to this moment, get over that hurdle, get through this disappointment, everything will be OK.

But as soon as the next generation set foot in the land God had promised to Abraham and his uncountable heirs, God’s people had to face the fact that life in the Promised Land continued to be life filled with conflict and division, with hatred and fear, with death and destruction. This is what theologian Ted Wardlaw simply calls life in the middle of time, when it suddenly occurs to you that the arc of history is not bending on its own toward justice or love or anything else you thought you might see in your lifetime. “We’ve lived long enough,” Wardlaw says, “to notice how much we miss our innocence, and how lonely we are without our heroes; but, here in the middle of time, we aren’t always able to see with much clarity, just where it is we’re headed and what it will take to get there. Here—in the middle of time—when we often feel so ‘in over our head’ and aware of how easy it might be to sink—we know those moments when we long...for some word which will...give meaning to time as we know it.”

That word is Jesus Christ, who assumed our lives in the middle of time to reveal our end, our destiny. “What we will be has not yet been revealed,” John wrote. “When he is revealed, we will be like him....” We will be the love that alone gives meaning to time as we know it. Likewise, on All Saints’ Day, the lectionary jumps to the end of the story, to the Book of Revelation, so that the end might give meaning to our lives in the middle. Writing to people who “went about...destitute, persecuted, tormented—of whom the world was not worthy,” an exiled elder named John tells them there will be a multitude no one can count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages. Divisions and hunger and thirst and weeping will be no more! As David Bentley Hart observed on the Op Ed page of this morning’s New York Times, this vision constituted a kind of counter-empire within the empire, one founded upon charity rather than force—or better, a kingdom not of the world but present within the world nonetheless, encompassing a radically different understanding of society....”

Of course, we can dismiss John's ending as fiction, as foolishness, as an ending that is not our ending, all the while continuing to hope for the Dow to keep soaring, the globe to stop warming, the nations to start talking, the politicians to quit fighting. God knows there are plenty of proposed endings that vie for our hearts, minds, souls and strength in the middle of time.

But at least on this Sunday consider the saints who have gone before us, whose lives give us eyes to see eternity already breaking into time, a counter-empire to the empire of divisions and hunger and thirst and weeping and death. Because faith for them was the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen, their lives in the middle of time were marked in three distinct ways.

In the first place, because in Jesus Christ they knew the end for which the cosmos was destined, they lived in the cacophonous middle of time with ***clarity and courage***. Clarity in that they did not get pulled into the fray du jour nor were they captured by every shiny object the culture was hawking. Rather their eye, focused on God's word, was attentive to the meaning that lies hidden in the heart of sorrow and disappointment and grief. You and I pray to see in this way when we gather here at time of death. Likewise, John's words give us eyes to see glimpses, intimations of eternity, moments when nations and tribes and peoples and languages are gathered as one, hunger is assuaged, thirst quenched, tears wiped away. This is also where courage comes in, because God's word is always a word contrary to the way the world is presently arranged, a word that refuses to be coopted by ideologues and partisans, by powers and principalities, by privilege and property, a word that will not settle for things as they are because it shines God's light on things as they were created to be. My Lord, what a morning!

In the second place, because they knew the end of the story, they lived in the disheartening middle of time with a vocabulary marked by ***hope and expectation***. According to the writer of Hebrews, the saints have always had a different way of speaking that communicates a restlessness with a world so at odds with God's reign. People "*who speak in this way*," he says, "make it clear that they are seeking a homeland...a better country, that is a heavenly one." Therefore, Wardlaw says, "the church [must become] the language school of the Kingdom of God...[Just as you] go to language school to learn how to speak the language of the country to which you are traveling...[so we] go to church [on Sunday morning]...to try our hand at a strange language." It is the language of hope. People who speak this language say things like: "Thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." These are not optimistic words or reasonable words spoken by students of the Enlightenment, but words dripping with hope and expectation. People speak in this way who hope for the coming of God's reign and expect it to invade time literally any minute! My Lord, what a morning!

Finally, because saints know the end of the story, their lives in the middle of time are marked by ***gratitude and generosity***. To be a saint, Frederick Buechner wrote, "is to live not with the hands clenched to grasp, to strike, to hold tight to a life that is always slipping away the more tightly we hold it; but it is to live with the hands stretched out both to give and to receive with gladness. To be a saint is to work and weep for the broken and suffering of the world, but it is also to be strangely light of heart in the knowledge that there is some[one] greater than the world [who] mends and renews...It is to live a life that is always giving itself away and yet is always full." It is to sing as though we are already in that multitude no one can count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, because we are. It is to eat and drink as though we will never again hunger or thirst. It is to die empty-handed and open-hearted because we have spent our one, precious and unrepeatable life giving ourselves away for Christ's sake. My Lord, what a morning! Alleluia! Amen.