

All Saints' Day
November 1, 2009

St. Margaret's
Annapolis

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

We human beings have always been concerned with the matters of life and death. In prehistoric times, people would look at the world around them and see the signs of death and darkness coming in the fall season. Imagine how they might sit around the evening cook fire, telling stories of their ancestors and sensing their spirits all around them. There is abundant evidence that primitive people understood that the separation between the living and the dead is a thin veil.

In later agricultural societies, the end of the harvest signaled a time of celebration and acknowledging the fallow time that lay ahead. One of the oldest of these festivals was the SAMHAIN (in Gaelic) celebrated by the Celts. It was a three day festival around the end of October or early November... a kind of year-end and new year festival during which the otherworld -- the world of the dead and the faerie world -- communicated with the world of mortals.

The dead were allowed to return to earth and visit their former places on the eve of the Celtic new year. The living would leave treats to appease these visitors, and if they feared someone among the dead, they would dress up in costumes to avoid being recognized. Does any of this sound familiar?

When Christians entered the scene, they came with new lenses, looking at everything in nature and in human societies in relation to the ultimate revelation of God in Christ. In other words, they went about "christianizing" the world. Sometimes the church did this really well, and sometimes not so well.

When the church did it well, it would incorporate the old festivals, blessing them and giving them new meaning. This is what was truly "universal" about the early church.

In this case, we ended up with a very similar three day festival: Halloween, All Saints' Day, and All Souls' Day.

Although the religious meaning of these holy days is nearly lost in the onslaught of the costume and candy industries, we don't have to look too hard to see that all of this is clearly about the relationship between life and death, between the living and the dead. We may not be so different from our prehistoric ancestors in that regard after all.

Most of us fear or dread death, and we long to hold onto our loved ones who have gone before us. It might even be that they long to hold onto us, too. These are deep and important human needs, and shouldn't be brushed off as so much hocus pocus or unresolved grief. There are too many stories from reliable sources, too many signs

and dreams and other events that remind us of the thin divide between this world and the next.

I heard one such story when I attend the funeral of a dear friend's grandfather. After the committal in the family cemetery, my friend took me aside and showed me a nearby grave, that of her three-day old infant girl. After telling me about the birth and sad death of her newborn baby, she went on to tell me how her long deceased grandmother had come to her in a dream, holding her baby, and reassuring my friend that she would take care of the baby for her.

When we hear such stories, it's tempting to dismiss them as so much... human longing, so much wishful thinking. But it is, in truth, a much more universal experience than the skeptic might think.

Art and literature, poetry, and more recently film, are full of such stories; art imitating life. In truth, who wouldn't want words of wisdom and encouragement from the other side.

In the genre of film, one of my favorites is a little-known movie called "Always," with Richard Dryfuss and Holly Hunter. It must be 20 years old now, but you can see it on TV from time to time. It's about hotshot pilots called smoke-jumpers who douse big fires with water and chemicals from the air.

In the movie, the main characters are Pete and Drinda, who are madly in love with each other, but he -- being a touch guy and all, never actually tells her that he loves her. Then, in an heroic flight, Pete saves a whole group of firefighters on the ground, but his plane is consumed in the enormous, high flames, and he goes down in a fatal crash.

Drinda grieves miserably and grows depressed. Meanwhile, Pete is allowed to come back from the dead to help a new smoke jumper. But it is Drinda he keeps visiting. Finally, in one scene, he says to her (though she can't consciously hear him), "The love we hold back is the only pain that follows us here."

It may only be a movie line, but it is about that longing for wisdom to live by that maybe, just maybe, can come to us from the other side. If we haven't grown too hardened, too cynical, surely stories like this touch something in us that rings true, or at least stirs our hopes.

The ultimate of these stories is the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. Our hearts ach with Mary's as she says to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." And we lean into Jesus' tenderness as he says to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?"

Scholars tell us that the raising of Lazarus is the foreshadowing of the resurrection of Jesus, and of our resurrection -- our life in God forever. But it is so much more than that. It is the answer to the longing of human hearts since the beginning of time. It is the promise of God in Christ that our hope is more than just wishful thinking.

We hear it again in the Revelation to John: "Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away." And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new."

The promise is incarnate in Jesus, who makes the blind to see, the deaf to hear, the lame to walk, the broken to be made whole. In him all things are made new. That's our hope for the next life; that all things will be new, that all will be well.

Did you know that Charles de Gaulle and his wife Evonne had a daughter born with Down's syndrome? It was before he became president of France. Even in the midst of the chaos of the war, he made time every day for his family and especially for his daughter. Evonne would often ask quietly and lovingly, "Oh, Charles, why couldn't she have been like the others?"

As was common in those days, the child died. After the Mass, there was a private graveside service. The priest pronounced the benediction and everyone turned to leave – except Evonne. She couldn't pull herself away. Charles gently touched her arm and said, "Come, Evonne. Did you not hear the blessing of the priest? Now she is like the others."

Yes, that's the promise and hope for the next life. But what about this life? What about the lives we are living now that will be woven into the fabric of God's creation; that will be part of the pattern of creation of which we are all part – the living and the dead?

Will Willimon, well known author and theologian says, "If every hundred years or so we cannot point to a Teresa of Calcutta, a Martin Luther King, Jr., a Desmond Tutu, or even a good old Pastor Brown, then we have a problem, because the world is quite right in judging Christianity by the lives it produces. Lacking changed lives, we pervert the gospel into a cerebral exercise. But Christianity is a lifestyle, the following of someone headed in a direction one would not normally go."

So it is All Saints' Day, and we are remembering all the saints, past and present. We are remembering all the departed. But if our lives aren't being transformed by God in Christ, then that's all it is: a remembrance, like nice memory, with about as much meaning as Trick-or-Treating.

But if we really understand ourselves to be part of the whole communion of saints, the living and the dead, then this is more than a remembrance. It is glimpse through that thin veil, and a recognition that our life in God has already begun, and we are being made new... even now. And that is worth celebrating!

Amen.

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