November 3, 2019 – Trinity Episcopal Church – All Saints' Sunday

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Almighty God, you have knit together your elect in one communion and fellowship in the mystical body of your Son Christ our Lord

from the Collect for All Saints' Day, BCP

Itaru Sasaki lives outside of Otsuchi, Japan, one of the towns that was completely destroyed in 2011 by a tsunami and earthquake. Even before the tsunami, Itaru had been grieving over the death of his cousin, and he ached for a way to express his sadness and to stay connected somehow, even though his cousin was no longer physically part of this world. Itaru came up with a solution: he found an old phone booth, like the kind you see in British movies from years ago: a tall rectangular box, three sides covered with paned windows. Inside the booth hung a black rotary phone.

He put the phone booth in his garden, high on a windswept hill overlooking the Pacific ocean, and it was in that space that Itaru found he was able to talk to his cousin, picking up the
receiver to speak aloud his thoughts and feelings, and to work through his grief.

The phone itself wasn't connected to anything – no wires, no telephone lines; Itaru called it his wind telephone. Though he couldn't connect with his cousin by means of a regular phone any longer, he trusted that his words would be carried on the wind across the fine line that separates this world from whatever it is that's next.

After the tsunami, people in Itaru's town heard about his wind telephone. In the years since that devastating event, thousands of family members of the more than 20,000 dead and missing have made their way to Itaru's garden, in need of the same kind of solace that Itaru sought – a way to continue a relationship with an absent loved one. Sometimes it's a widow or widower who steps into the booth alone; other times whole families crowd in the tiny space, passing around the receiver to one person after another.
As part of a report on how Japan was faring in the years after the tsunami, a film crew got permission to film and record people visiting the wind telephone, and what you see and hear is people having the kind of ordinary, even mundane, conversations that we all might have with a relative we haven't talked to in a while: catching up about how the kids are doing in school, who visited recently, plans for the garden next season.

Compelled by love, the longing for connection is strong, even when all you have is words carried along by the wind.

[Recapped from a story on This American Life, September 23, 2016, called “Really long distance”]

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When my daughter was in college, each fall I would make a visit to Smith College in Western Massachusetts for my version of Parents Weekend (I liked to visit a few days ahead of when all the other parents arrived, so as to avoid the crowds.) Smith College timed this event carefully, to coincide with when the fall leaf colors would be at their New England best. Each year when I visited, Eli and I would manage to find a few hours to do some
hiking, exploring the series of mountain peaks that curve through the Connecticut River Valley, which offer great views of all that color. The last year I made this visit, we decided to add something new to our hiking and leaf-peeping: we went geocaching.

If you're not familiar with geocaching, it's kind of like going on a treasure hunt, but instead of following a pirate's yellowed parchment map to reach buried treasure, you use your phone's GPS to find coordinates – a specific longitude and latitude – where someone has hidden some sort of cache. It could be small, like a film canister, or larger, like a Tupperware container. The caches might be tucked into a half-decayed tree stump or tied to a fence post or suspended from a high branch.

Inside the containers is not treasure, per se – although sometimes people will leave little trinkets, which finders can swap out for something that they're carrying with them. But whatever else is inside the cache, there's always a notebook or a scroll of paper on which each geocacher who discovers the
cache's location writes their name or initials and the date of the find.

This trek with Eli was my first time geocaching. I liked wandering through the woods trying to find the specified coordinates. I liked the challenge of hunting for the cache, looking for the tiny out-of-place details – a piece of string or the glint of a metal fastener – that might offer a clue to the item's whereabouts. But most of all, after finding the cache, I liked looking at the piece of paper on which previous geocachers had written their names and dates, some of which stretched back 8 or 9 years.

All those previous finders....even though we didn't know them, didn't even really know who they were – we were connected to them. They had stood where we were standing. They had hiked the same woods and searched just like we were searching. That's not the part that struck me, though. What connected us was not really the activity of geocaching. What connected us was trust and choice. Anyone, in all those intervening
years, could have moved or destroyed the cache, but they chose not to. Not only that, but many geocachers will carry with them tools and supplies to fix a fraying piece of string or duct tape together a cracked container. Strangers, across time, trusted one another to care for the cache, and return each item back to its appointed hiding place. Bound by trust and choice, the longing for connection is strong, even among unknown travelers in the woods.

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With the close of this year’s World Series - which, I must confess, I didn’t watch - but with all the news of that series, I was remembering the only baseball playoffs and World Series I have watched in recent memory. It was 2016, I was living in Chicago, and the Cubs and the Cleveland Indians - the then two losing-est teams in baseball history - were facing off. I don’t know how people in other parts of the country felt about that pairing, but it was a big deal in the Midwest. All over Chicago, you didn’t have to wait very long or go very far to hear them: the tender stories
people shared about their grandfather or their mother, their
cousin or their uncle – people who were die-hard Cubs fans but
who didn't live long enough to see their favorite, goat-cursed
team win the World Series.

Among those stories was this one: a man named Wayne
Williams Jr., who drove all day from North Carolina to central
Indiana to sit in the cemetery by his father's grave to listen to
game 7. Wayne Williams Sr. was a Navy man who did his boot
camp training at a naval station on the north side of Chicago,
which is where he began and developed his love for the Cubs.
Wayne Sr. and Wayne Jr. had a pact that when the Cubs made it
to the World Series, they would listen to the games together, but
Wayne Sr. died in 1980. So, 36 years later, Wayne Jr. made the
drive, went to his dad's gravesite, set up his folding chair draped
with a “W” flag, and settled in to fulfill a decades-old promise. At
the end of the game, Wayne Jr. said, he stood quietly and told his
dad, “We did it” and then placed the “win” flag next to his dad's
grave.
Nurtured by promise and hope, the longing for connection is strong, even between a son and his long-dead father who waited a lifetime to share the joy of a world championship baseball team.

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Connection through love. Connection through trust and choice. Connection through promise and hope. These are the things that draw and bind us together. These are the gifts – the blessings, the beatitudes – by which God has knit us together as a community, as the Body of Christ. We are intended by God to live and serve and celebrate as one, mutual, inter-related, inter-dependent body. This is the way we need to be with each other – bound by love and trust and hope – not because of want of reward or fear of punishment, but because our wills, our fates, our very lives are connected and intertwined.

We celebrate that inter-connectedness this All Saints' Day, remembering our link to the lives of those who have passed on, drawn closer to the presence of God. And today we also celebrate
Alex Thomas, who is to be baptized (at the 10am service). Alex, an adult, will make intentional and explicit his desire to be part of this community of Christians who are linked together by the baptismal promises we share, to love and serve God, to love and serve our neighbor, to seek out the image of God in one another, all the while proclaiming God's Good News: that the God who instilled in us a deep longing for connection has also given us the means to fulfill that longing: love and trust, choice and hope and promise – extending across time and across space, to all of God's creation. Amen.