

ALL SAINTS SUNDAY
November 4, 2018

Text: John 11:32-44

Theme: Glory to God

On Tuesday evening more than 2,000 people attended the community service at Temple Rodef Shalom. It was a very powerful and moving service as we sat next to our neighbors from all faith traditions that included Jews, Muslims, Sheiks, and Christians. We stood with our elected representatives at the state and national levels. We stood with our local law enforcement officers. And we stood as the names of thirteen people were read and thirteen candles were lit for the eleven people killed at the synagogue in Pittsburgh and the two people killed at a grocery store in Kentucky. In Kentucky the suspect tried to enter a church but the doors were locked so minutes later he entered the store.

On this day we turn our attention to those who died this past year and all those who remain close to our hearts. In our prayers we will read each of their names with reverence. We will take a brief moment to remember the different ways these men and women bore witness to our hope that is rooted in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

In the raising of Lazarus, God sends us the clear message that he has power over death and any evil we experience in this world. God does not allow death to have the final word. And Jesus, the one who is the resurrection and the life, sends us another clear message. He sees our present sufferings and out of compassion he enters into them so that we may come to believe. Our God is not a distant God but one who is fully present with his people – in life and in death and for eternity.

Based on the events of the past few weeks it would be good and right for us to broaden our understanding of these texts to include our sense of loss due to our present sufferings. For these things also deserve our attention and demand our care. Our losses do not have to be on the same monumental scale as to what took place in Pittsburgh or in Kentucky or in Sutherland Springs or in Charlottesville. Our losses can be less complicated but just as profound.

It can include watching our loved ones experience some form of memory loss and the weight that bears on those left to care for them. People lose their jobs and they do not find new employment right away which increases their anxiety over unpaid bills. We struggle with chronic illnesses that occupy our mind almost every minute of every day. Family members may already be lost to us if our relationships with them are broken over unresolved issues.

And the list continues . . .

Our texts invite us to pay attention to those who are robed in white and who are gathered in the church triumphant but each of us has come (or might still be coming) through our own ordeals. Our lessons speak to all of us who struggle to find hope or healing. In Isaiah the prophet tells us of a God who destroys the shroud that is cast over all people. God wipes away the tears from our faces and takes away our disgrace. In the psalm we hear that God is strong and mighty. We hear the assurance that the earth belongs to our Lord and all that is in it. And in Revelation we are told that God has made his home in our midst. Once more we are assured that our God is not a distant God but one who is fully present – in life and in death and for eternity.

With all of that as our foundation let us now capture what is taking place as Jesus neared the home of Mary and Martha and Lazarus. He first encountered Martha who was in despair. She had hoped that Christ would have come sooner so as to save her brother from death. But (in faith) she proclaimed her belief in the resurrection of the dead on the last day.

As the story continues Jesus stays in the place where he encountered Martha and he waits for Mary and the others to approach him. And as they all walk toward the tomb Jesus is deeply moved and he begins to weep. He sees the suffering and the loss and he looks upon their grief and is overwhelmed with his own sense of compassion and empathy. In his weeping Christ is not only being human but he is genuinely weeping over the death of Lazarus and for the pain of those who loved him.

God freely enters into the sufferings of others.

In this single action Jesus gives us our response when called upon to be present with those who are grieving for any reason. We hear their cries and we look upon their grief and out of our own sense of love and compassion we weep. But we can do more than that ... we can say with sincerity that we believe God is in the midst of their struggle because in his weeping – over Jerusalem, at the tomb of Lazarus, and in the Garden of Gethsemane – Jesus (the Son of God) reveals the sorrow of the almighty God. God sends us to sit with those who suffer. God wants us to share that the presence of God might not remove the suffering but God will enter into it and God will walk us through to a new day.

This is what I believe is the gospel message for today. When we are stuck in our grief or loss (either due to the death of a loved one or the myriad of other losses we experience in life) we have little capacity to imagine a different future. But in his wisdom Christ first announced the basis for a future hope and then he entered into the story of these grieving people so he could walk them to a better place. He invited them to believe and they would indeed see the glory of God.

We too can do that for others. We can speak to what we believe. We can tell them about the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and how the promises of God are sure and true. We can tell them this beautiful story of the raising of Lazarus and let them know that God sees us in our grief and God sees how it weighs us down. God sees all the challenges that we face and God promises to accompany us . . . and God does that through us.

And we can assure the one to whom we are speaking that where there is faith there is always struggle. Struggles and doubts and feeling overwhelmed and wondering if God is out there – these are not signs of failure or a lack of faith but are a real testament to us being real with God as we wrestle with such deep questions.

On Tuesday evening it was a sight to behold as thousands of people walked together into that temple. It was there that we chanted and sang our glory to God. We clung to what we have in common and did not dwell on what divides us. Our comfort came from being in the same space at the same time to worship our Almighty God. God was present and God blessed our worship and God now takes our hand and accompanies us.

God destroys the shroud that is cast over us. God wipes away the tears from our faces and takes away our disgrace. Our God is strong and mighty. We shall not fear for the earth belongs to our Lord and all that is in it. God has made his home in our midst.

Our God is not a distant God but one who is fully present – in life and in death and for eternity – Amen