

Sermon, All Saints, November 7, 2021, Jane A. Beebe

“...Like gold in the furnace he tried them,
and like a sacrificial burnt offering he accepted them.
In the time of their visitation they will shine forth,
and will run like sparks through the stubble.” (Wisdom of Solomon 3:6-7)

I love all of Jesus’ encounters with this family in Bethany: Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. John 11 contains the whole story of Lazarus’ illness and death, the reactions of the two sisters, and the sometimes-perplexing words and behavior of Jesus. As you probably remember the sisters send a message to Jesus telling him that their brother is sick. Nevertheless Jesus remains a further two days in the place where he had been staying. When he finally comes to Bethany Lazarus has been in the tomb for four days. Both Martha and Mary say to Jesus in turn, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” (John 11:32) By now Mary is weeping together with the mourners who have come to the tomb with her.

We know how the story ends. Yet I do not find what Jesus does leading up to Lazarus’ emergence from the tomb any less bewildering. For me, that begs the question, “Why this particular Gospel on All Saints?” Through his interactions with this family so dear to him, Jesus clearly has something to say about resurrection. Certainly he is looking ahead to his own. Yet I wonder if he is also showing us how the resurrection miracle comes to each of us. Perhaps a saint is one who has lived into the reality of the resurrection to such a degree that we are given hope by their example.

First, Jesus does not skirt physical death. He asks where Lazarus has been laid. We learn that Jesus is deeply moved by the grief of the sisters and of the mourners, so much so that he begins to weep himself. Isn't that what saints do as well? They embrace their frailty as human beings, enabling them to accept and heal the frailty of others. Then Jesus comes to the tomb and asks that the stone be taken away. Martha, practical and down-to-earth as always, exclaims that Lazarus has been in the tomb four days. Jesus appears undaunted by the stench. I find that good news. Whatever entombs us, or is entombed in us, is not going to be pretty, or smell so good. Jesus removes that stone anyway. Saints also seem to be able to overcome barriers, accepting what we may not be able to accept in ourselves. I think of St. Francis of Assisi and his embrace of the leper. Jesus promises no less than the glory of God for those who are able to do this.

Once the stone has been removed, before acting further, Jesus calls on God. A few weeks ago we had the collect that begins: "Almighty and everlasting God, you are always more ready to hear than we to pray..." Jesus takes the time to pray, to affirm God's presence and power, and to show gratitude for God's willingness to hear him. It is difficult to pray when we are in extremity, when we most need it. Saints are able to demonstrate such confidence in God that we are inspired to put our hopes in God's hands as well. Recently one of you reminded me of the power of the "Prayer of Humble Access" that may be prayed in Rite I of the Eucharistic

Prayers directly after the Fraction. The words that always move me are: "...We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy Table. But thou art the same Lord whose property is always to have mercy..." Always. For Lazarus and for us.

Finally Jesus cries out with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" And Lazarus comes out of the tomb, still wrapped in the linen cloths with which he has been laid to rest. There is a cloth over his face and more wrappings around his hands and feet. Jesus says to those gathered at the tomb, "Unbind him, and let him go." (John 11:44) The word used for 'unbind' has the sense of releasing something that has been held back. That is the true miracle of resurrection: that we are ultimately released from what binds us. Saints cooperate with God in this work, whether it is simply allowing God to release them, or in helping to release others. I was especially struck that Lazarus comes out of the tomb with a cloth still over his face. He would be unable to see, nor could his friends and family see him. Perhaps Lazarus is now able to see Jesus for the first time, and to show his living face to the world. He steps into the light.

There is something extraordinary about the light this time of year—especially when we experience a bright day after one with gloomier weather. The light is precious now that we experience less of it. Even though many of the leaves are down now, I am still seeing many shades of yellow and gold glowing in the

woods. Now that the branches are becoming bare, vines and bushes of bright berries reveal themselves. Perhaps that is why I was taken with the reading from the Wisdom of Solomon: I have seen the gold and the sparks of which he speaks all around me. I find that even the brown, fallen leaves reflect the light, emitting a glow of their own.

A few days ago it was nearing sunset at the end of my daily walk. The landscape was suffused with light. The shape of the hills was limned by a deep rose-orange. The air seemed clear and pure, refreshing with its new chill. The expanses of wetlands and ponds created by the beavers seemed almost molten with reflected light. By the time I reached my car it was dusk. I felt I had walked through holy ground. Jesus said, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” (John 8:12) Doesn’t that describe the saints? They are those who not only are walking in the light but reflect it back to us, “[running] like sparks in the stubble.”

The Apostle Paul often addresses the people as saints in his pastoral letters. We can take it then that we too are called to be saints—not with a capital ‘S’ but with a small ‘s.’ In the course of our lives as we strive to be faithful we reflect the light of Christ. Someone does not have to have lived a public life full of visible achievements. I love Frederick Buechner’s view of what a saint is. He said, “A saint is a life-giver... A saint is a human being with the same hang-ups and dark

secrets and abysses as the rest of us. I hadn't known that before. But if a saint touches your life, you come alive in a new way..." (*Secrets in the Dark*, p. 177) There is something, though, in the face, in the eyes of these everyday saints, that may be detected. As Jesus tells us in Matthew 6:22: "The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light..."

The KJV uses the phrase: "...If thine eye be single..." I love that phraseology because it expresses the integrity and focus of the one who follows God. Perhaps it is holiness. Buechner also said, "...Holiness is not a human quality like virtue. If there is such a thing at all, holiness is Godness and as such is not something people do but something God does in them..." (*Secrets in the Dark*, p. 177) And isn't it true that it is at the end of the day, at the sunsets of our lives that the light may shine out brightest?