

“Live On”

Isaiah 25:6-9      Mark 12:38-44

Twenty Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B, November 7, 2021

First Presbyterian Church, Sandpoint, Idaho

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Last Monday was All Saints Day. We claim our place and connection to that great cloud of witnesses held in God’s care beyond all time and space. We trust God’s eternal love.

Eternal love. This is more than clock time, more than sequential time marching along in a linear fashion. “Eternal” has more than a “time without end” aspect, but it’s qualitative. Eternal love is more descriptive of God’s Presence, which is not bound by time, but from outside of time, and holds time together.

Isaiah gives a glimpse of this kind of vision as he talks about a feast made by the LORD, God Almighty. This feast is given for all peoples, on a mountain, which in ancient imagery is a place where heaven and earth meet. Time is given appropriate use, as the wines are well-aged, the rich foods are prepared with quality nourishment and the deepest flavors. This mountain is a home of peace and welcome.

Not only is this feast given by God, but divine action also destroys. A shroud cast over all peoples, a sheet spread over all nations, even death itself. These are all destroyed. There's a finality in this destruction, with no threats of recurrent chaos rearing pain or suffering later. This kind of destruction is beneficial rather than detrimental. Tears are wiped away from all faces, and the disgrace of God's people is removed from all the earth; we trust expansive grace is at work. Isaiah gives us a very inclusive vision as God's action is for all, and the entire Earth is in on this healing process.

Did you notice all the times the word "all" is used? Several times, both for what will be *done* and what will be *undone*. God does wonderful things for all. Which is good, because we know too well that there are tears, that the nations struggle with one another; it seems they always have, and we wonder if they always will. Isaiah mentions that shroud is over all people, and shrouds have a way of obscuring vision, of stifling the flow of refreshing air, and shrouds keep us from seeing each other as we are; they become a barrier, a hinderance. This inclusive vision reminds us that no one is exempt from pain, as tears are on all faces. Lots of imagery in this passage!

The book of Isaiah is complicated. It's writing captures the struggle of God's Hebrew people as they deal with the Assyrian Empire for hundreds of years, six, seven, eight centuries before Jesus. First Isaiah, Second Isaiah, Third Isaiah, the authorship picks up on different types of themes, from trusting in God alone, to having hope amidst Exile in a foreign land, to the joy of return to Jerusalem, and into disillusionment when all those hopes don't turn out the way they were envisioned.

Today we still get that mix of hope and disillusionment, to hear God's intent, to have a vision and see deliverance from oppression is a real thing; this can be trusted because God brings about redemptive outcomes. But we, like the people Third Isaiah writes to, also know that life is more complicated than that, and we still face injustice and there are economic and social disparities that wreak havoc on people and other creatures all around the globe.

It's important to see that the tears are wiped from all faces because this means that all faces have tears. We don't need to minimize this or deny it. It's just the opposite, we need to cultivate the capacity to grieve well, to

claim the need for tears, the reality of the shrouds we deal with in life, the difficulties of problems, from personal to international.

A couple of examples. We are in the Sixth Great Extinction, and yet humanity as a species seems to lack the capacity to grieve the loss of countless other species in all parts of the globe. Humanity's behavior and practices continue to degrade rather than renew the environment. Even conferences, like the Conference of Parties, or COP 26, underway this past week in Glasgow, Scotland, which headline news in America gives minimal attention to, leaves many people changing the name to Conference of Polluters. As the urgency of response is lost and self-interest and economics cloud the vision of a healthy world, many lose hope.

We are in a global pandemic that has killed over 5 million people worldwide and the United States, supposedly the wealthiest nation in the history of the world, has the highest death toll, and yet we still get sucked into arguments over masks and vaccines and mandates and science and religion and a great many things to defend our position, our opinions.

In the history of the world, the long, deep-time history, it is not survival of the fittest based on competition that brings life's expressions to their

fullness. It is collaboration, cooperation, and mutuality. Even trees know this, and entire forests are linked underground by networks of communication. Chemical trails and mycelium build forest health and add layers of soil over generations and eons. The large glaciers that flowed in this region, forming the scars on the Monarch Mountains above Lake Pend Oreille, the ice that melted 10,000 years ago; these processes have led to forests of cedar and fir, and those large trunks, long, expansive branches, green needles, and deep roots sequester carbon far more than small, young trees of early successions of forest. The soils in the shade stay moist and soft, but when clear cutting interrupts, those soils are impacted by rains, wind, and sun; the natural nutrients leach out and wash away.

That was one thing I didn't miss in Europe, was the sight of clear cuts. In Germany and Switzerland, managed forests had timber cuts on smaller scales. Selective removal of certain mature trees took place, yet still keeping the larger forest intact and balanced. As you hike along a trail, you may notice tags on trees, knowing that some computer someplace knows the species, the age, the relative size, and what neighbors that tree lives among. I haven't seen tags like that on trees around here, and vast stretches of forest

are clear cut as American industry shifts their practices, even while we decry Brazil and want them to protect the Amazon Forest as the lungs of the planet.

One way to interpret Mark's story as Jesus watches the hypocrisy of those who are in charge compared to the sincerity of an unnamed widow who gives from her poverty, involves the idea of the false self and True Self. Our false self keeps score, takes the count, gets wrapped up in the need for prestige and appearances, and uses other things for self-referential purposes. Materialism is alive and well in this regard. The True Self, as shown by this woman, is in unity with everything, has focus on God's Divine Presence, and trusts the wisdom learned through the pain and losses of life. Our True Self is eternal, coming from God as a gift to the world; is untouched by, but aware of, the ravages of sin; abiding deep, grounded and rooted in Wisdom that moves over the waters of chaos to trust the power of creation and God's declaration that life is good.

Our True Self knows that we are sustained by collaboration, strengthened by unity within diversity, and gifted with hope that moves us through grief and despair. Our True Self builds resiliency with compassion, shares patience and love, and gives room for self-critique and inner healing.

Through humility, our false self is set aside; this conversion involves righteousness, where everything works as it is intended to work, in harmony with everything else. A capacity develops, a capacity to recognize and claim the shadow side of our lives, rather than ignore them or project their disfunction onto others, unconsciously transmitting our pain.

As we go into the week ahead, I invite you to pay attention. As you reference things, such as pointing at a tree or bird or pretty scenery; as you point them out, see if you catch yourself using objective language, like “isn’t it pretty” or “that is lovely.” Then, substitute more personal pronouns, rather than “it” or “that” use “he” or “she”, like “The tree is amazing, he is growing well” or “the little bird is chirping, she has quite a voice.”

The breath of God sustains all things. Learning to honor divine presence in others, to personalize their right to exist, is one step in recognizing the divine in ourselves. If you don’t recognize Christ’s living presence in you, then your collaborative connection with fellow creatures and the Earth herself will most certainly be overlooked.

Like the widow putting in a penny; to find that humbling, divine presence, it's often easier to discover this by working with the poor rather than those who contribute out of their abundance.

We are sending boxes of kitchen items to World Relief in Spokane this Thursday to help refugees from Afghanistan resettle their lives in the Pacific Northwest. This is one way our congregation tries to express love from the core of who we are as creatures made in the image and likeness of God. The likeness of God involves compassion, redemptive outcomes through difficult circumstances, and coming together as community to claim hope even when we may feel disillusioned. May those boxes be more than utilitarian, and every time those kitchen items help prepare a meal, may the sacredness of food, the gift of relationship, and the joy of faith be experienced as True Selves connect beyond the limits of time and space.

That widow exemplifies what Jesus taught. She gives all that she has to live on. May we live on with the same faithfulness as we give thanks to God for God's faithfulness to all generations, both now, and forever. Amen.