

CONFRONTING DEATH WITH LIFE

JOHN 11:32-44

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All Saints Day is a kind of Easter in November. A day we look death in the eye and proclaim life. It's why the scripture reading today is Jesus raising Lazarus from the grave.

We don't have lilies this morning but we do have Mozart – that incredibly uplifting, life-affirming genius of composition.

Yet, perhaps you don't feel so uplifted today – it's not sunny spring with crocuses blooming but cold autumn with dead leaves falling. Maybe Easter seems a distant memory and you've fallen, like those autumn leaves, back into some safe, old routine of life.

Like the husband in the New Yorker cartoon. Sitting across from his wife in the living room, behind the wall of his newspaper she says to him with a twinkle in her eye and a mischievous smile, "OK we'll try it your way – let's ignore any problems that come up in the next twenty years and see what happens."

Judging from her spunky comment that husband is in for some serious struggle. She's not going to let him lie dormant, avoiding issues forever.

My hunch is some of us here today may be going through some serious struggle. We are remembering the names of loved ones and friends who died since All Saints 2002. Eighteen friends no longer here at the table with us as we celebrate the Lord's Supper. Some of those deaths were quite premature. The shock of having a loved one here one day then gone the next is like having your world turned upside down.

Some of us this morning are dealing with grief. Others may be struggling with health concerns or career concerns or relationship concerns. Perhaps some parent here today is struggling with their teenager.

The problem with life is that you can't sit in the easy chair and hold the newspaper up like the Great Wall of China forever. At some point you have to struggle. You have to open your eyes and look at the truth. You have to accept things as they are then figure out how to move forward.

Like this morning's story about Lazarus. There he was dying. His sisters called for Jesus but Jesus was late in arriving. Four days late to be exact. The common belief among the Jews in the ancient world was that after four days the soul of the person who died had departed. The person was fully dead. That's how it was with Lazarus when Jesus showed up.

The sisters Martha and Mary, the crying mourners and friends all reached out to Jesus when he finally came. But by then they were skeptical he could do anything. They did not think anything could overcome four days of death.

So Jesus calls upon God in prayer, orders the stone to be rolled away from the tomb, then commands Lazarus to come out from the grave which, in fact, he does.

It is a remarkable showdown between life and death and life wins.

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But there is the struggle we all go through at one time or another. Sometimes it doesn't feel like Easter. Sometimes when we hold up our own suffering to God we say the words 'life is stronger than death' it's hard to accept in our hearts.

What I want to say today is do not despair. Even if you think you are at the point with some situation beyond hope or help hang in there. God is good.

I recently heard someone explain the physics of the butterfly's cocoon. Did you know once the caterpillar spins the cocoon tightly around himself he undergoes a metamorphosis? Tiny wings sprout. The caterpillar is becoming a butterfly.

But what caught my attention in this process is how important the struggle of the caterpillar is. Here he is trying to break out of that cocoon and just can't do it. It's hard. He doesn't have the strength. So he pushes and pushes. And by pushing, here's the fascinating part, the fluid in his body is transferred to his wings. And those tiny, underdeveloped wings turn into big beautiful strong wings. Wings able to break out of the cocoon.

You see the struggle is what's important. When I think about Lazarus coming out of the cocoon of that tomb, grave cloths trailing in the dust the picture I get is of a butterfly breaking out, ready to fly away.

Lazarus' wings have sprouted. His struggle, with God's help, has opened the way to new life. It was a remarkable transformation. Life is stronger than death.

The message this morning is that God is present to us in and through the struggles we face – in some cocoon of life. And God is present to us in and through the community in which we live and serve. This congregation, our families, special relationships hold us accountable, keep the boundaries clear. Relationships in which we struggle to discern where God is leading us can be cocoons of struggle producing new life.

My old teacher and friend Henri Nouwen used to tell the story of a conversation between twins in the womb. The sister said to her brother, 'I believe there is life after birth.' Her brother protested vehemently. 'No, no this is all there is. This is a dark and cozy place, and we have nothing else to do but cling to the cord that feeds us.'

The little girl insisted, 'There must be something else, a place with light where there is freedom to move.' She could not convince her twin brother. But after some silence, the sister said hesitantly, 'I have something else to say and I'm afraid you won't believe that either, but I think there is a mother!'

He shouted, 'what are you talking about? I've never seen a mother, neither have you. Who put that idea into your head? This place is all we have....'

The sister was quite overwhelmed. But she couldn't let go of her thought, and finally she said, 'Don't you feel these squeezes every once in a while? They're quite unpleasant and sometimes even painful.'

'Yes,' he answered. 'What's special about that?' 'Well,' the sister said, 'I think these squeezes are there to get us ready for another place, more beautiful than this, where we will see our mother face-to-face. Don't you think that's exciting?'

Finally, you and I decide to live as if this is all there is.

Or, we decide, in faith that is childlike, to live as if we are secure in God's love especially in life's struggles – and that one day we will see God face to face even as our loved ones we remember today now see God.

All Saints Day is Easter in November. Life is stronger than death.
You can trust that. Amen.