

Mary Elizabeth Hanchey

November 7, 2021

“Their One True Light...”

Isaiah 25:6-9, Revelation 21:1-6a, John 11:32-44

We are a week out from Halloween, and I have an important question for you: in which drawer in your house did you hide the Reece's cups that were only for you? I mean Butterfingers. Ok fine, yes, I bought a bag of each and hid them in the guest room. It's not that big a deal.

Halloween has become the second most commercialized holiday, I heard recently. This can't be based entirely on candy. There's also the orange, green, and purple lights, the giant furry spiders, the bones that folk arrange in the yard to look as if a skeleton is emerging from the ground, the costumes, and the dozen or so gourds and pumpkins one might arrange on one's front steps. So much pageantry.

I'm afraid we may be reaching a tipping point where there is simply not enough room in the patio furniture sections at Lowes for Santas until after Halloween.

Some Christian communities eschew Halloween but I think it gives us a pretty intriguing on-ramp for our observance of All Saints. Perhaps noting the commercialization of Halloween itself can help us to claim sacred space for observing All Saints as a people of faith.

All Hallows Eve is, after all, that precarious night before All Saints Day (which is November 1) - precarious because there is always a danger that the spirit world will prevail, or that it will, at least, haunt our realities a bit. People dressed as goblins and ghosts to scare off the real ones. Their candles fought the darkness and repelled those things that haunted it. And so jack o'lanterns shine light at the entrances to our homes, and we are safe. Or so the story goes. Death will not swallow us up.

And ah, yes, there it is. On All Saints we face death. And many of us are sitting with Martha, furious. “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” And we are still waiting for whatever this next bit is. Resurrection of the body? Healing in this world? Like actually coming back to life? Healing in the next? And what was Jesus' instruction to Martha- unbind him. Unbind him. That instruction feels personal and poignant. What is the work of unbinding that lies ahead of us?

And oh how this imagery from Isaiah and Revelation calls to me as it also seems to call to this Lazarus story:

“The maker of heaven and earth will swallow up death forever and will wipe away the tears from all faces,” says Isaiah.

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“God will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more, mourning and crying and pain will be no more” says Revelation.

These passages talk to each other over nearly 800 years.

The passage from Isaiah comes from God’s blessing of the earth in the restoration of Zion after the ferocious battle and the downfall of a great, unnamed, enemy city (perhaps Ninevah or Babylon?). Destruction of the earth is attributed to God, and then, so is this blessing.

The passage from Revelation comes after the last judgment. Personified death, along with Hades, are the last enemies vanquished, and there is, finally, a new heaven and a new earth in which God dwells among the people. This language is interesting because it plays with the language Emmanuel, God with us, a name given to Jesus by our Advent liturgies.

And so in the midst of this beautiful and engaging language about vanquishing death and drying tears, there is this wrestling with theodicy. There is this wrestling with whether Jesus was somehow responsible for Lazarus’ death, and what the restoration of life to Lazarus was really about; with how we navigate stories in which God is described as the cause of destruction and of restoration. And there are no easy answers.

But there are promises.

- There is the promise that our grief will not prevail.
- That not even death will prevail.
- There is the promise of new life from the One who redeems us - “See, I am making all things new.”
- That our life in this world begins and ends in God, and that there is restoration in this world, and in what is to come.

I wonder how to hold these promises in the midst of all that we face. And I wonder what the unbinding of Lazarus has to do with restoration. I wonder whom we are called to unbind? I wonder what it really means that death will be swallowed up?

As we observe All Saints we remember all of those whom we love who have died, those whose bodies we have buried and whose companionship we covet. Those whom it appears that death has, well, swallowed up. We grieve death. We grieve violence and suffering. We wonder together when and how restoration will prevail - in a cosmic sense? In small moments? But perhaps we are called into the restoration. Perhaps we are called to be light that repels those things that haunt the

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darkness. Perhaps the promise that death will not swallow us up is, well, less of a promise and more of a claim on our lives.

And on this day when we observe All Saints, and honor all of those who have come before us, all who from their labors rest - we also grapple with our own labors, with this claim on our lives as those who follow Jesus.

May I tell you a story?

My dad was a missionary in the Philippines for a couple of years after college.

He was actually like a junior missionary, so that his work was sometimes to minister to the mks, the missionary kids - the children of the other missionaries there.

One day he and some others took all of these children and youth on an outing across the bay to an abandoned fort. They bargained with local fishermen for transportation, so that the children were scuttled across the open waters in many tiny vessels.

In an already remote part of the Philippines, across open waters, on an even more remote and abandoned island - a child fell and was badly injured. And though they secured her to a board and loaded her back onto a tiny boat - a storm blew up and the waves were nearly insurmountable. It was nearly dark when they made it back to the mainland with a child who required a medical evacuation.

And a helicopter could not land in the dark.

Do you know what happened next?

Can you guess?

Folx came from all over the village with their jeeps, and they made a giant circle in a field, and they all shone their light into the center. Late at night, in the dark, after a long and hot day, the people gathered with what light they had to make a place for help to land. They let their lights shine, and rescue arrived.

Y'all, I cry every time I tell this story. I cry every time I write this story. Because it is such a poignant distillation of who we are to be as a people who follow the risen Jesus, as a people who are being redeemed.

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We will sing For All the Saints in just a moment. "Thou wast their rock, their refuge and their might; thou, Christ the hope that put their fears to flight; 'mid gloom and doubt, their true and shining light, Alleluia, alleluia."

Will you commit to shining your light along with mine? To letting the light of Jesus shine through you?

That is our theme for Stewardship at UCCH this year. Let your light shine. Will you? Will you let your light shine - together we can make space for help to land.