

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 7, 2021

FEAST OF ALL SAINTS

TRADITIONAL

“IF ONLY...”

IF ONLY HE HADN'T DIED. IF ONLY SHE HADN'T LEFT. IF ONLY I HAD MADE A DIFFERENT DECISION. IF ONLY I HAD NOT DONE THAT. IF ONLY THINGS WERE LIKE THEY USED TO BE. JESUS, IF ONLY YOU HAD BEEN HERE...

I SUSPECT MOST OF US HAVE, AT SOME TIME, LIVED AN “IF ONLY” LIFE. IT COULD BE ABOUT ANYTHING: OUR NATION, OUR CHURCH, OUR SOCIETY, OUR SCHOOLS, OUR FAMILY, OUR MARRIAGE, OUR CHILDREN, OURSELVES. BUT REALLY WHAT “IF ONLY” IS ABOUT IS THE PAST.

WE WANT TO PRESERVE WHAT WAS AND KEEP THINGS THE WAY THEY'VE ALWAYS BEEN. WE WANT TO UNDO WHAT IS AND GO BACK TO WHAT WAS. SOMETIMES, THE WORDS “IF ONLY” BETRAY OUR ATTACHMENT TO THE PAST, OUR DISLIKE OF WHAT IS, OR OUR FEAR OF SOMETHING NEW. ALMOST ALWAYS, IT COMES FROM A PLACE OF SORROW AND LOSS, REGRET, FAILURE OR DISAPPOINTMENT.

THE ILLUSION OF “IF ONLY” WRAPS AROUND OUR LIVES LIKE GRAVE CLOTHES. WE USE IT TO TRY TO BIND UP WHAT HAS FALLEN APART, PRESERVE WHAT IS DECAYING, AND TIE US TO WHAT HAS BEEN LOST. IF YOU UNDERSTAND THIS ILLUSION OF “IF ONLY”, THEN YOU PROBABLY KNOW MARY, AND HER SISTER MARTHA.

BY THE TIME JESUS ARRIVES, LAZARUS HAS BEEN IN THE TOMB FOR FOUR DAYS. HIS HANDS AND FEET BOUND WITH STRIPS OF CLOTH, HIS FACE WRAPPED IN A CLOTH. ACCORDING TO MARTHA, HE'S NOT JUST DEAD, HE PROBABLY SMELLS TERRIBLE. MARY IS WEEPING, THE JEWS ARE WEEPING. LAZARUS IS DEAD.

AND THE FIRST WORDS OUT OF MARY'S MOUTH TO JESUS? “LORD IF ONLY YOU HAD BEEN HERE, MY BROTHER WOULD NOT HAVE DIED.” MARTHA HAD SAID THE SAME THING WHEN SHE WENT OUT TO FIND HIM JUST MINUTES BEFORE. EVEN SOME OF THE JEWS BEGAN TO QUESTION... EVERYONE WANTS JESUS TO TURN BACK TIME TO PRESERVE THE PAST AND MAINTAIN WHAT WAS. IF ONLY JESUS HAD BEEN THERE.

THIS STORY TODAY IS SIGNIFICANT BECAUSE IT GIVES US A GLIMPSE OF OUR LORD'S HUMANITY, BUT IT IS ALSO A CRITICAL EVENT THAT GALVANIZES OPPOSITION AGAINST

HIM. FOR WHILE OBSERVERS COULD DISPUTE THAT THE OTHERS WHOM JESUS RAISED FROM THE DEAD MIGHT HAVE BEEN IN SOME KIND OF DEEP SLEEP OR COMA, ALL JEWS ACKNOWLEDGED THAT AFTER FOUR DAYS IN A TOMB THE SPIRIT WOULD HAVE LEFT THE BODY AND THE DECAY PROCESS WOULD BE UNDERWAY FOR LAZARUS.

NEVERTHELESS, JESUS DEMANDED THAT THE STONE BE REMOVED. AFTER REMINDING MARTHA THAT HE HAD TOLD HER SHE WOULD SEE AMAZING THINGS, JESUS PRAYED TO HIS HEAVENLY FATHER AND THEN HE SPOKE WITH POWER AND AUTHORITY: *LAZARUS, COME OUT!* JOHN TELLS US THAT THE DEAD MAN CAME OUT, HIS HANDS AND FEET BOUND WITH STRIPS OF FABRIC, AND HIS FACE WRAPPED IN A CLOTH. THEN JESUS GAVE HIS FINAL INSTRUCTION: *UNBIND HIM AND LET HIM GO.*

IN AN ANTICIPATION OF HIS OWN RESURRECTION, JESUS MAKES IT CLEAR THAT DEATH WILL NOT HAVE THE FINAL WORD HERE. *UNBIND HIM AND LET HIM GO.* IN THIS PROFOUND ACT, REMEMBERED BY THE EARLY CHURCH AND CELEBRATED IN OUR GOSPEL LESSON TODAY, GOD SHOWS US THE DECISIVE POWER THAT IS PRESENT IN JESUS CHRIST. THEREFORE, DEATH SHALL NOT HAVE THE LAST WORD IN YOUR LIFE OR MINE. IN JESUS CHRIST, THE POWER OF DEATH IS CONQUERED FOREVER.

BUT IN THIS TIME AFTER JESUS' RESURRECTION AND BEFORE HIS COMING AGAIN, HOW EASY IT IS FOR US TO FORGET THIS GOOD NEWS. WE CAN EASILY BIND OURSELVES IN A WORLD VIEW THAT LIMITS US FROM ANY HOLY IMAGINING OF A LIFE BEYOND THIS LIFE. IF WE ARE NOT CAREFUL, WE CAN WRAP OURSELVES IN SHROUDS OF DOUBT AND BURY THE VERY ESSENCE OF OUR CHRISTIAN HOPE, IN THAT HOPELESS BELIEF THAT EVERYTHING ENDS WHEN WE DIE. ALAS, IT WOULD APPEAR THAT LIKE LAZARUS, WE NEED SOMEONE TO UNBIND US AND LET US GO!

WE NO LONGER HAVE TO SEEK THE OLD HEAVEN AND EARTH. A NEW HEAVEN AND A NEW EARTH, A NEW LIFE ARE BEING GIVEN TO US. THAT MEANS, THAT WE MUST UNBIND THE PAST AND LET IT GO. UNBINDING AND LETTING GO BECOME AN OFFERING AS WE FREE IT TO BE MADE NEW, TO BE GIVEN NEW LIFE, TO BECOME A NEW CREATION. IN DOING SO, WE DISCOVER THAT WE TOO HAVE BEEN FREED, WE TOO HAVE BEEN GIVEN NEW LIFE, WE TOO HAVE BECOME A NEW CREATION. THAT, MY BROTHERS AND SISTERS IS THE CELEBRATION AND GIFT ON THIS FEAST OF ALL SAINTS.

THIS IS A TIME WHEN WE TRADITIONALLY PAUSE TO REMEMBER THOSE SAINTS OF THE PAST, THE *CHURCH TRIUMPHANT*, THOSE WOMEN AND MEN WHO ONCE SERVED WITH US, BUT NOW REST FROM THEIR LABORS. IT CAN BE A RATHER STRANGE DAY THAT SIMPLY CALLS UP

THE NAMES OF THOSE WHO TRANSFERRED FROM THE *CHURCH* ON EARTH TO A NEW STATUS IN HEAVEN. IT CAN BE A TIME TO SIMPLY BUY FLOWERS AND TAKE THEM TO THE CEMETERY WHERE OUR LOVED ONES ARE BURIED. NOTHING IS WRONG WITH EITHER OF THOSE TRADITIONS. BUT I HOPE WE MIGHT REMEMBER THAT ALL OF US ARE SAINTS, EACH OF US WHO HAS BEEN BAPTIZED INTO CHRIST'S DEATH AND RESURRECTION, JUST AS MUCH AS THOSE WHO REST IN THE LORD.

ALL SAINTS' DAY GIVES US AN OPPORTUNITY TO THINK ABOUT OUR STATUS AS THE LIVING SAINTS OF GOD, THOSE WHO ARE STILL STRIVING TO GIVE A GOOD WITNESS THROUGH OUR WORDS AND OUR DEEDS. EACH ONE OF US IS A PRECIOUS PART OF THE *CHURCH* HERE ON EARTH, AND WE EMBODY GOD'S KINGDOM THROUGH ALL THAT WE DO EVERY DAY.

OUR GOSPEL LESSON IS A PERFECT TEXT TO HELP US DEAL WITH THE CHALLENGE OF BEING THE CHURCH. IN THIS TEXT WE SEE JESUS DO TWO SIGNIFICANT THINGS: ONE IS ALWAYS REMEMBERED ... THE SECOND ONE EASILY OVERLOOKED:

- FIRST, JESUS ORDERED LAZARUS TO COME OUT. THIS IS THE ACT THE CHURCH HAS RECALLED FOR OVER TWO THOUSAND YEARS. THIS IS THE WONDERFUL SIGN OF POWER THAT INSPIRED SO MANY IN THE CROWD TO BELIEVE IN JESUS. THIS SINGULAR ACT SOLIDIFIED HIS OPPONENTS IN THEIR DETERMINATION THAT JESUS WAS DANGEROUS AND WOULD HAVE TO BE ELIMINATED, LEADING ULTIMATELY TO HIS ARREST AND CRUCIFIXION.
- BUT EQUALLY IMPORTANT IS THE SECOND THING JESUS COMMANDED: HE DIRECTED THE GATHERED COMMUNITY TO UNBIND LAZARUS, AN ORDER THAT MAKES IT CLEAR THAT JESUS WANTS THOSE WHO BELIEVE IN HIM TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS MIRACLE OF LOOSENING PEOPLE FROM ALL THAT LIMITS THEM FROM AN ABUNDANT LIFE.

THIS MIRACLE IS A REMINDER TO US THAT WHILE JESUS ALWAYS HAS THE POWER TO HEAL, TO CAST OUT DEMONS, TO FEED, TO RESTORE THE BROKEN, AND TO OVERCOME DEATH, HE LOOKS TO HIS CHURCH ... THOSE OF US WHO HAVE BECOME HIS DISCIPLES THROUGH OUR BAPTISM ... TO SHARE IN THIS HOLY WORK OF ENCOURAGING HOPE AND OVERCOMING SUFFERING.

THE SAINTS ARE THE ONES WHO REMIND US - BECAUSE THEY ARE THE ONES WHO WERE WILLING TO UNBIND AND LET GO. THEY WERE THE ONES WHO TRUSTED THE NEW CREATION OF CHRIST MORE THAN THEY DID THE CIRCUMSTANCES OF THEIR PAST. THEY LET CHRIST DEFINE WHO THEY WERE, NOT THEIR LIFE CIRCUMSTANCES. THEY REFUSED TO LAMENT "IF

ONLY". AND THEY ARE OUR WITNESSES THAT IT IS SAFE TO DIE, THAT PASSING AWAY IS NOT AN ENDING, BUT A NEW BEGINNING. THEY ARE OUR ROOTING FOR US AS WE UNBIND AND LET GO. THEY ENCOURAGE US IN BECOMING A NEW CREATION.

WHENEVER WE WITNESS THE BAPTISM OF A LITTLE ONE, WE, TOO ARE IMMersed IN THE DYING TO SELF AND RISING TO A NEW LIFE IN JESUS. THE SAINTS GATHER ROUND, CHEERING AND APPLAUDING, PRAYING AND PRAISING GOD FOR THESE NEW YOUNG SAINTS TO BE. BAPTISM WASHES AWAY ANY PAST, PRESENT OR FUTURE "IF ONLY". AND EVERY TIME WE REFUSE TO LIVE AN "IF ONLY" LIFE, EVERY TIME WE UNBIND THE PAST AND LET IT GO, WE RETURN TO THE WATES OF OUR OWN BAPTISM, OFFERING OURSELVES AGAIN TO BE MADE A NEW CREATION. AND GOD HIMSELF IS WITH US.

WE CALL THOSE WHO HAVE GONE BEFORE US THE SAINTS. YOUR PARENTS, YOUR SPOUSE, YOUR CHILDREN, ANY AND EVERY WHO HAVE GONE AHEAD OF YOU – WHILE THEY MAY HAVE DIED, ARE NOT DEAD. THEIR LIVES HAVE CHANGED, NOT ENDED, AND THEIR PRESENCE IS REAL. THEY HAVE LAID A PATH BEFORE US, MARKED WITH THEIR OWN FOOTPRINTS OF PRAYER, LOVE, TEACHING, ACTION AND CHOICES.

COME OUT OF THE TOMB OF DARKNESS, JESUS BECKONS TO LAZARUS AND TO YOU AND ME. I CAN'T HELP BUT IMAGINE THE SAINTS GROW SILENT IN ANTICIPATION, PRAYING AND HOPING, WONDERING, WAITING AND WATCHING, MAYBE EVEN WHISPERING TO THEMSELVES AND TO EACH OTHER "WILL SHE COME OUT OF THE DARKNESS? WILL HE BE UNBOUND?"

IN JESUS NAME, THE ANSWER IS AN UNEQUIVOCABLE AND RESOUNDING YES! BECAUSE IN HIM, BY HIS POWER AND AUTHORITY, IN HIM ALONE LIES OUR NEW LIFE. AMEN.