

10-30-11 **Able Was Dead, yet Still He Speaks**

Psalm 30: 1-5, 8-12; Hebrews 11:1-4

Squaw Valley Chapel, United Church of Christ, Olympic Valley, CA

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Tomorrow, if you're lucky enough to live where children come to your door, curly haired ghosts and 3-foot goblins will arrive cherishing dreams of plastic pumpkins filled with candy. It will be Halloween. Tomorrow is also the 494th anniversary of the day the Rev. Martin Luther, tacked 95 theses to the door of a church in Wittenberg, Germany. His dream was of a church that would not be obsessed with the accumulation of wealth or the exercise of power; rather a faith based church. His dream set off a rebellion that led people, priests and nations out of the Roman Catholic Church. It's not a red letter day at Queen of the Snows, down the street.

The day after tomorrow – on almost every church's calendar - is All Saints Day; the day after that is All Souls Day. Between the two of them everyone who has ever lived is recognized and cherished.

This time of year - the end of October and the beginning of November – provides difficult decisions for the minister and worship leader. There are so many choices. On the Sunday closest to Halloween, which is also closest to the anniversary the Protestant Reformation, and All Saints Day, and All Souls Day, what will be our focus?

It's the kind of Sunday that lengthens ministry. It takes years to get it all in. Last year we held a blessing of the costumes, making much of Halloween. Next year I plan to pretend to be the Rev. Martin Luther and will explain why I am nailing this long list of complaints to the front door of the church. Today I want to talk about saints and souls, about people such as Abel, Enoch and Noah, Abraham, Sarah and Moses – people who lived by faith and yet they died. What happened to them? Where are they now?

Over the years I've heard a lot of reasons as to why death has to be a part of God's plan.

Some say: "Our God is a jealous God." And God reserves eternal life just for herself."

Some say God wants to underline the necessity of living life well – right now. Life would lose some of its cache if it were forever. “Oh, my! Another day in the mountains! Boring!”

And the Christian Church has often put itself in the position of having to insist that death is necessary – at least as a temporary interruption – so that God will have time to do a little fine tuning. If humans are ever to be moral they will have to be mortal, so God will have a chance – during purgatory or limbo to clean up our act.

Why do I think death exists? I have no answer, not even a clue; but what I do have are a few faith statements that affirm God works through every dead-end situation and offers life, whenever, wherever we choose to embrace it.

Nothing is over until God says it's over. “Abel is dead, yet still he speaks.” (Hebrews 11: 14).

One of the faith statements upon which I rest my life was not found in the Bible. I first heard it from a science teacher when I was in the 7th grade. He said, “Energy is never lost. It can be transmitted from one form to another, it can change from liquid to gas to solid, but it does not go away. He demonstrated what he was saying by lifting back a steel ball on a string and letting it go. It collided with the ball nearest to it and the ball farthest from it flew apart from the rest. This action continued – back and forth -until the whole thing ran down, and some of us wanted to point out to him that he seemed to be working from a faulty thesis. The energy was gone. He agreed that it was no longer visible but insisted that it was still around. Some had become heat. Some of heat has dispersed into the air making the whole room a little bit warmer and if we could find some common denominator that would let us measure all these disparate parts we would discover nothing had been lost.

Nothing is over until its creator says it is over. Abel is dead, but still he speaks.

I more or less abandoned the study of science after the 12th grade – so maybe there's something I don't understand about energy, but

what I have been doing has convinced me that love also fits this rule. Love is an indefatigable force that can change losers into winners, that be given away only to have it return not the least bit diminished. Dylan Thomas once wrote "Though lovers be lost, Love shall not, And Death shall have no dominion." Saint Paul said it more succinctly: "love never ends." (I Corinthians 13)

Richard Corson, onetime minister of the United Methodist Church in Campbell, CA spoke in a sermon of a wedding at which he had recently officiated. The wedding had almost been cancelled. Just a month before the ceremony was to have been held, the bride's father was killed in an auto accident. The family's first thought was "the wedding must be postponed"; but the survivors, wife son and daughter, began to talk about, "What would he have wanted?" The wedding was held as planned.

"Everyone tried to make the best of it. The bride came down the aisle on the arm of her brother and when it was time for him to answer the question, "Who gives this woman to be married to this man?" he took a few deep breaths and answered: "Her father, her mother and I."

Afterwards Mr. Corson congratulated the brother on his answer. He replied, "I hadn't thought exactly what I was going to say... but when you asked, 'Who gives this woman...?' I felt as if I had been poked in the ribs and that Dad was whispering a shout in my ear: 'Say it! Say it for me, now!'" – adapted from "Keeping Love Alive," delivered May 28, 1995.

Love can leap from one realm to another. Death has no dominion. Nothing's over until God says it's over. Abel is dead, yet still he speaks.

And I have learned that whatsoever is good is another of those things that never die. So many of the saints were martyrs.... They were crushed by evil, killed for spite, and held up to ridicule... but the one indignity that a saint never suffered was having her good erased, having his example denied.

I used to read books written by George Kennan, one of this country's greatest authorities on the Soviet Union. So I paid attention when he was called to appear before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to offer his views on what was happening in the Soviet Union - communist principles seemed to be disintegrating. He shared with the committee something he had once heard Ambassador Chip Bohlen say: That the failure of communism - when it came - would be connected to the fact that it had no answer to death. Claiborne Pell, chairman of the committee, asked, "What countries do have an answer to death?"

"I do not know." Kennan replied. "I do know that the Christian faith does. They believe that when a person tries to do the right thing it is for a value that exceeds the period of their own lifetime." - cf. report by Mary McGrory, Washington Post, April 4, 1989.

Death has no dominion over life, love and the pursuit of good. Nothing is over until God says it's over. Abel is dead, yet still he speaks.

All Saint Day/ All Souls Day are celebrations of what lasts, intimations and explanations of Easter. They insist that we have a cloud of witnesses all about us proclaiming that life, love and goodness never dissipate.

When Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey.... borrowing from the prophet Zechariah's this symbol of the peaceful leader ... When Jesus rode in on a donkey and the crowd started yelling, "Blessed is he who comes in God's name," the Temple leaders were offended and they ordered Jesus to tell the mob to be quiet. Jesus responded: "If they were to keep quiet, the very stones would cry out." - Luke 19:40.

Some things cannot be erased: nail love to a tree and it proliferates; shoot principles from a balcony in Ford's theater and they thrive; kill a dream on a balcony in Memphis TN and yet it will still speak.

All day today, All Saints Day, we can hear the voices of those who once - in-person - shared this space with us: Sandi Poulsen, Pat Sutton, Madeline Bohannon.... Just this week I received word of the death of a friend, Bill Kelly, the Episcopal priest who two years ago baptized his newest granddaughter right here. His gentle listening

spirit will, forever, people my sense of who is worshipping in this sacred space.

The author of the book of Revelation once wrote about the cloud. (7:9-17):

Behold I looked and there was a great multitude dressed in white gathered before the throne of God and Jesus was there among them. I wondered, "Who are these?" And an elder answered, "these are those who have come out of life. Never again will they hunger or thirst, yet the lamb will lead them and God will brush every tear from their eye.

Death has no dominion. Nothing's over until God says it is over. Abel is dead but yet he speaks.