

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

Every year in the Lutheran Church calendar we have these two Sundays – Reformation Sunday and All Saints Sunday – celebrated back to back and devoted to who we are, where we have come from, and what is most important in the life of the church. On the actual calendar they are back-to-back days, not weeks, October 31 and November 1, but we transfer them to the final Sunday of October and the first Sunday of November. Reformation Sunday reminds us of the radical nature of God’s grace, that we are not the authors of our fate, and that that is a good thing, in spite of the affront to our egos, especially those of us who like to be in charge. All Saints Sunday is a reminder that we are not alone on our faith journeys, that we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses past, present, and even future, those who have been the beneficiaries of that radical grace and knew it, and who lived as though it made all the difference in their lives. It is also the day for reminding ourselves that death is not the final word on us or on our loved ones, and that is something that is very important to be reminded of when death has made its presence known in our lives, as it has in this community of faith here at Grace over the past year.

The introductory paragraph on the inside cover of your bulletin this morning notes that “Of all three years of the lectionary cycle, this year’s All Saints readings have the most tears.” These readings acknowledge the human reality of loss. They give voice to the reality of our pain. But they also remind us that God is with us throughout all the difficulties of life, and each of them points to God being at work to undo the powers of sin, death, and evil. All three of these are go-to texts, classic biblical passages that address death and God’s answer to it.

I’m only going to deal with the Gospel reading today, though, and want to focus on three things about this well-known episode in John that can help us put death in perspective, our own inevitable death, yes, but particularly the death of loved ones that we are acutely aware of on this Sunday.

The first thing I want us to notice are Mary’s words to Jesus when she first sees him. “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died,” words that her sister Martha had also spoken to Jesus just before this. If you remember the longer story, Jesus did not come immediately when he was brought the news of Lazarus’ sickness, but he waited two days. That delay might have figured in the sisters’ frustration here. Jesus could have come more quickly, but he didn’t. He could have stopped Lazarus from dying but he didn’t. “You could have done something about this Jesus,” Martha and Mary were saying, “Why didn’t you do something about this?” That is a prayer that so many people pray to God when facing the death of loved ones, especially when death comes suddenly, or what we judge to be prematurely. Maybe you’ve prayed it too. “Why did my wife, the love of my life, have to die? And why now? Why so soon? Why couldn’t my dad have lived a little longer and had the chance to know his grandchildren? Why on earth was my baby daughter born with an incurable, fatal disease?”

Jesus’ answer is not immediately satisfying. What he told Martha in their earlier exchange was that this was not the end for Lazarus, which Martha already believed, but it wasn’t helping. Again, maybe you’ve been exactly there. “Yes, someday we’ll be together again. This isn’t the end. I believe that. But it sure *feels* like the end.” “I am the resurrection,” is Jesus’ response to. “If you are connected to me you have resurrection life right now, whether you are dead or alive.”

What that means takes time to sink in when we are engulfed in grief, but it also leads to the next thing to notice in this text: Jesus is with us in our grief. He feels our pain, he experiences

death's sting. That, too, is hard for us to get our mind around. This is John's Gospel, the one that starts with Jesus in beginning with God, Jesus who is the Word, who is God, who becomes flesh to dwell among us. So we rightly ask, if Jesus really is God, if he is as fully in control of things as he seems to be, and if he already knows what is going to happen with his friend Lazarus here – and we know that he does, because when he first hears that Lazarus' is sick he says, "this illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory" – so if he already knows how all of this turns out, why would he be so deeply moved by the sisters' grief, as the text says he is? And why would he himself join in their weeping? It's not something we could pull off. If we knew for certain that a gravely ill loved one was going to recover, we would not be so deeply moved, we would not be scared, we would know that when we said, "It will be all right" that it really was true. But that never happens, so for us this is a mystery. Yet this is what it means for God to become flesh in Jesus. It means that God is fully invested in our reality.

Contrast this with that famous story in Exodus 32, where Moses goes up the mountain to talk to God on behalf of his people. God has not yet come fully down. Moses has to go up to meet him. And while he is gone, for quite a long time, the people give up hope that he will ever return. They think they have been abandoned, and so they go in search of another god. That's when they make the golden calf. And God is deeply moved by that, but not in a good way. God tells Moses that he is going to utterly destroy the people for this infidelity. They can't even keep the first commandment, you shall have no other gods! But Moses gets between God and the people and talks God out of it.

That slightly disturbing yet surprising story of God taking Moses' objection seriously and being willing to change God's own mind is, in its own way, already a remarkable picture of God's mercy toward God's people. But how much more so is this story of Jesus weeping at the tomb of his friend Lazarus? All of this is to say that there is no simple and satisfying answer to our desperate questions of God in our grief, the "why did this have to happen" questions, the "where is God now" questions. There is only the promise that God is fully with us as one of us in the midst of the suffering, frustration, and sadness that engulf us in times of grief. And not only with us, but for us, determined that our present reality not be our complete and final reality.

The final thing to notice in this text isn't actually in this text but comes next. This story is preparation for the final act in John's Gospel, Jesus' entry into Jerusalem to face his own suffering and death for us and for our salvation. Think about this: Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead only to have him join him on his journey to death together with his other disciples. All of Jesus' disciples, who follow him however imperfectly on his journey to the cross, who witness his resurrection, who receive the Holy Spirit to empower them in their mission of bringing God's love and forgiveness to others – all of those disciples end up dying, many in rather unpleasant ways. So poor Lazarus, presumably, has to go through death a second time. Jesus' resurrection is not a private event for disciples only, and it is not the end of the story. Jesus does not allow them to remain behind their closed doors, but sends them out into the world as agents of God's ongoing mission to love and save the world by the power of the Holy Spirit, trusting that that mission will one day finally be accomplished.

And so it is for us disciples in our own time. So as we come forward now to light a taper in remembrance of our loved ones who have died, let us also be comforted by the assurance that death does not have the final word for them or for us. May God grant us grace to cling in faith to God's promise of life for Jesus' sake, and may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.