

*Facing the Abyss*

1 John 3:1-3; Revelation 7:9-17

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*el dia de los muertos*

It's ironic that last week I preached a sermon in which I made the point that in God there is no death, and this week we're celebrating the feast of the dead! At first glance it seems to be a contradiction. I don't believe it really is, but I must also confess that I continue to grapple with what it means to say "in God there is no death." After all, death is the one inescapable reality of all life on this planet. For that matter, even Jesus didn't escape death. So if God is the God of life, where does that leave those of us who die? Then again, in Jesus God did die, and once again we seem lost in a quagmire of contradiction.

Well, let's ponder that contradiction a bit more. The lectionary gives us these two passages for All Saints' Day, and both of them address the problem of martyrdom. For the first three centuries of Christianity, being a Christian could literally be fatal. Not always, and not in all places, but it was a constant threat in a way that is no longer true for us today. The letter of John has been talking about apostates, people who deny their Christian faith. This is causing people to worry if they're wrong to be Christians. John is assuring them that God is still with them, even though members of the community have abandoned them.

The book of Revelation is even more to the point, having been written, as most scholars believe, in a time when real persecution was beginning to take place. When people were being arrested and put to death just because they were Christian. Seriously, if you were part of a new community of faith where members were being rounded up and fed to the lions, what would you think? When the Powers That Be are using all their might to get out the message that Being a Christian = A Nasty Death, when your faith is being identified with death, isn't it possible you might have some doubts? An executed Messiah? Are you nuts?! The Roman Empire definitely thought in terms of death, and conceived of their power in terms of their ability to put to death anyone who opposed them. The Romans wanted people to think that if these Christians were getting killed, then either their God was powerless to save them, or their God just didn't care. Haven't we all heard that argument before? It kind of makes sense, doesn't it?

But the book of Revelation rejects that death-logic. John has this vision of a great multitude. Who are they? "These are they who have come out of the great ordeal," in other words, persecution. "They have washed their robes and made them clean in the blood of the Lamb." Jesus' shed blood, the blood of martyrdom, of unjust murder. Have they been abandoned by God? Was God too weak to save them? No. The martyrs themselves cry out, "Salvation belongs to our God and to the Lamb" Does God not care about them? Far from it! Rather, because they've suffered so much, "they are before the throne of God...who...will shelter them. They will hunger no more and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb...will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes." There's that word, LIFE. We thought they had been given up to death, but we see that they are drinking from the spring of life. We thought they had been abandoned by God, but lo, we find that God is wiping away every tear from their eyes. What an affirmation! And it is this assurance that enables those early Christians to face the worst that the Roman Empire could do to them, and yet survive and even flourish. Death had not power, because they trusted so fully in life.

We today do not suffer such persecutions. Our dead are not, for the most part, glorious martyrs. Yet the promise made to those in the past hold true to this day. The prayer I read in my funeral services says, “For this one, all sickness and sorrow are ended, and death itself is past, and they have entered the home where all your people gather in peace.” This is true whether the deceased one was a martyr, or whether they lived a long life and died peacefully in their sleep.

Death is still hard, though. It’s still a separation. And the truth is, many of us could probably face our own deaths much more bravely than we could the death of our loved ones. All this talk about drinking from the spring of life is great for the departed, but those of us on earth miss them. We miss them. And that’s not something we can forget. They may be in a better place, but our place feels worse because they are no longer in it.

And that’s what this day is about. On this day, the Day of the Dead, we invoke our ancestors here on this holy ground. We call to them across the abyss. How we long to touch them again, to hold them, to hear their voices! We can only stand at the edge and wave to them at a distance. But we call to them just the same. We remember them and what we loved about them. We remind ourselves that even though they are long gone, even though days may pass where we don’t consciously think of them, they are still a part of our lives. Our grief never really ends because our love never ends. And on this day we remember that in God there is no death. God is LIFE, the God of the living, and in God we are united now and always with those who have gone before us. We don’t understand all the details, but we know it is true.

I love how the Bible holds on to the mystery and the assurance at the same time. John says, “See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God? And that is what we are... Beloved, we are God’s children now – we, and those who have passed on before us. We are God’s children now; what we will be – beyond this life – has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when it is revealed, we will be like God. And what is God like? Loving. Living. Caring. Abundant life and eternal love. Extravagant welcome and courageous witness. God is about transforming community. All of the best qualities of our loved ones come from God.

So on this day, let us stand at the abyss and wave to our dear departed. They are in a better place, and our place is better because they were once in it. Together we look forward to the day when we will be reunited at last at the throne of God, and God at last will wipe each and every tear from our eyes.