

All Saints Day
Memorial Lutheran Church, Toledo
November 4, 2018

Text: John 11:32-44
Theme: Seeing the Glory of God

Life is precious. It is fragile. It cannot be taken for granted. We have a sharp sense of that truth as we hold a newborn baby, mark a milestone in life- a confirmation, a graduation, a marriage, embrace a beloved spouse or friend, or enjoy a stunning day and wish we could revel in it forever. Such preciousness is underscored when we experience the pain of death of a loved one-whether it be that of an infant like Abel Ribka who would live only a few days or that of Charlotte Marsh who lived a long, rich and full life and who expressed a preparedness for her death. The sorrow of death is compounded when it seems untimely and we want to protest and cry out to God. You have your own stories. As we light the candles of those whose lives touched the life of this congregation, these stories cannot be recalled without a sense of loss- perhaps accompanied by a measure of regret, thanksgiving or some combination of both. We can make peace with some of these deaths easier than others. When a loved one has suffered much and dies, we are grateful that the suffering has come to an end. When a loved one has been praying for her death, accompanied by a rich faith, we can be grateful for a blessed death. But other stories simply take our breath away. Tuesday many of us gathered at Temple Shomer Emunim in Sylvania for a prayer service to mark the tragic deaths of 11 who gathered for Sabbath at Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh.

As we acknowledge our loss, many of us cannot help but be mindful of our own deaths. Recently an elderly man who attended the funeral of one of our members commented to me with a wry smile, "I think I am next." The Ash Wednesday Liturgy powerfully reminds us as a cross is drawn on our foreheads with ashes and the words are spoken, "Remember you are dust and to dust you will return." On this All Saints Sunday we get to ask, "How does the faith we confess shape our grieving and the recognition of our own mortality?"

In the Gospel lesson Jesus' dear friend, Mary, greets Jesus with words many of us will cry out at some time in our life, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." When we are confronted with the loss of a loved one, or when we hear the reports of another mass shooting, and the accompanying devastating sorrow experienced by so many, we understand Mary's words. "Lord, where were you? How could you let this happen?" For Mary, the question was compounded by the reality that she had contacted Jesus while Lazarus was still alive. Surely, Jesus could restore him to health. But death seemed like a gap too far for even Jesus to bridge.

There is a place for tears. As he witnessed the cries of Mary and Martha and those who mourn Lazarus John tells us, "Jesus was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved." Haven't you been there too-sadness, bewilderment, anger at the power of death and more. As Jesus requests to be taken to the tomb, he is invited to, "Come and see", and move even closer to the reality of death and the deep sorrow that accompanies it. The text says simply, "Jesus began to weep." No explanation is sought or needed for these tears. That does not end the speculation. "See how he loved him" some whisper while others offer an accusation, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying."

Jesus does not shrink back from death. Again, "greatly disturbed", he moves to the tomb, sealed by a stone. When Jesus says, "Take it away", the other sister Martha objected, "Lord, there is a stench. He is really dead. His body is decaying." We get to overhear Jesus' response and so take his words into our hearts, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" The stone is removed. Jesus prays for the attentiveness of God but

also for the attentiveness of those who have gathered around. It is not only death with which God must deal. But it is also the faith of those who are living with death. So he prays, "Act dear God, '...so that they might believe that you have sent me.'" That is the faith that can sustain us—even and particularly in the presence of death.

With that Jesus cries out, "Lazarus, come out." And he does! He is all wrapped up. It's the community that is invited to "Unbind him, and let him go." This one, sent by God, has power even over death. In seeing that story unfold, we see the glory of God. That's what we are invited to believe—even and particularly when confronted with death. But the one who restores Lazarus to life, by that very act, will insure his own death as the plot to kill Jesus now intensifies. By calling Lazarus out of the tomb, this one who weeps and grieves, will experience the hardness of heart that will not be satisfied until Jesus is himself placed in a tomb. Those who do so will expect his body to stink as do all who surround him. But the God who is active in the restoring of Lazarus through Jesus' word will also bring life to those who will trust the word of the risen one whom God has sent.

In the face of all the questions surrounding our living and dying, I cannot offer easy answers. Most of them are not satisfying anyway. But I can point to our Lord Jesus who in our living and dying invites us to abide in him. I can point you to a community in which the risen Lord who knows something about sin, sorrow and death invites us to "unbind and let go" those who are still wrapped up in that which takes away life and hope, I can point to the one who says, "I am the living bread. If anyone eats of this bread, that one will live forever." (John 6:51) I can point to this crucified and risen one who declares, "My sheep hear my voices and I know them, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand." (John 10:27-28). To trust ourselves, our loved ones and all who mourn to such words is to open the possibility of "seeing the glory of God."