

All Saint Sunday - November 3, 2019
OLD SOUTH CHURCH IN BOSTON
Seemed to Have Died, a sermon by Nancy S. Taylor
Based on the Wisdom of Solomon 3:1-5, 7-9

In the eyes of the foolish our beloved dead seemed to have died. So it is written in the apocryphal Book of Wisdom. But I say to you: not all is as it seems.

Christians claim that 2000 years ago a Galilean from Nazareth, a carpenter's son, a self-taught rabbi turned the world upside down and inside out. He changed the rules and subverted the order of things.

Since then, for the past 2000 years, Christians have inhabited and are privy to, a world of reversals: The first will be last. The lost are found. The hungry are fed. The mourners laugh. The lowly are lifted up. The mighty taken down. The crooked made straight. The prisoner released. The ill healed...the blind sighted. The sinners forgiven. And, not least, in Christ and through Christ, in God's time, this: the dead are raised. Your beloved dead, raised.

In the eyes of the world they *seem* to have died. But not all is as it seems. Christians claim that our dead are not dead, but alive.

This is a stunning claim. An audacious claim. That our dead are not dead. That mortality – that great sticky wicket; that jam; that hardest of truths which we can't bear and which most of us avoid contemplating at all costs – isn't the jam it seems to be, not quite the sticky wicket everyone assumes it to be. Christians claim that death is not the finale. There is an encore.

Christians claim that God has made for us a way through death, across a sea, to a farther shore, where the saints gather in a greater light; where they, the saints, our beloved dead, are not dead. But alive. Alive in God's transcendent love.

Which means this: Christians are in possession of a most exquisite, the rarest, most precious, most defiant and hard-to-get-your-hands-on commodity: hope. Hope is an attitude, a perspective, a way of seeing things.

C. S. Lewis wrote this, "I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen: not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else." That's what we are getting at here: that by Christianity, by its light, you may see everything else...even death.

By the light of the sun (S-U-N) the large fiery star at the center of the solar system the kings of the world – the potentates and czars, the prime ministers and presidents, the emperors and monarchs – rule the world. But I say to you, not all is as it seems.

I say to you that by the light of the Son (S-O-N) by the light of Christ, the kingdom of God is near; that it is Christ who is Sovereign; the mighty, the haughty, the cruel are brought down from their thrones and the lowly raised up.

By the light of the Son (S–O–N) by the light of Christ, the first will be last. The lost are found. The hungry are fed. The mourners laugh. The crooked is made straight.

In the light of Christ, the poor, the vulnerable, the marginalized—all those who count for nothing in this world—count for very much in the Kingdom of God. The poorest of the poor, the miserable refugee, the migrants suffering in detention who count for little or nothing in this world: they are precious in God's sight.

The challenge of All Saint's Day is to see the world by the light of Christ: refracted through resurrection.

Now, let me pause here, and tell it true; to state what you already know. But it need to say it. In the eyes of the world, you'd be a fool to believe these unbelievable things, these demonstrably unprovable things: like the lost will be found, the lowly lifted up, the dead raised.

I have a cousin who is a scientist, an entomologist, a bee-man. He is such a great guy. I love this cousin. He thinks me an utter fool, a chump, a boob, a sucker, a dupe for believing all these unbelievable things. Oh, he's too polite, and too kind to say as much to me, but I know what he's thinking.

Just to be clear. I believe in science, in the theory of evolution. I believe in microscopes and laboratories. My cousin's research areas include bee phylogeny, evolution, molecular systematics, and biodiversity. I believe in all these, whatever they are.

I get my cousin's position. I get it that we can't prove what we claim to be true. I am not unaware of the foolishness, audacity, nay the pluck of the Christian position. Furthermore, I am not unaware that we could be wrong. Maybe there is no God. Maybe the dead, our beloved dead, are dead as doornails.

But maybe not. Maybe God is abroad upon the wide universe. Maybe there are untold mysteries stirring in the wind. Maybe there is a world beyond this world that is shimmering and lovely beyond our imagining.

Maybe those first followers of Jesus, who met him, experienced him alive and shining after he had been crucified, after he had died and was buried – maybe they (and his story which has thrilled the world for over 2000 years; and given hope to the hopeless) – maybe it is, in its own way, in its own dimension, as true as science...or even more so.

Here is what I know: The stories we tell as Christians; the world we inhabit; the lens by which we are to see everything by the light of God, the hope to which we are privy: these are game-changers. If you step into this world, inhabit it, see all things by its light: you will know the deepest peace, the highest hope. Such is the promise of the Gospel.

Ours is a world of divine reversals – a countercultural world where the norm of might makes right is subverted. It is a strange and lovely new world in which the crooked is made straight, and the lowly are at last lifted up. It is a counterintuitive world in which it is the peace-makers and not the fighters who are held in the highest esteem. It is in this world that Christ is Sovereign, and not the

paltry heads of state who occupy the world's palaces. And, by no means least: in this world, refracted through the lens of resurrection, our beloved dead are not dead. They are alive in God's transcendent love.

I get it, the audacity of this claim. I get it that it seems to all the world as if it is death that is omnipotent.

But I say to you: not all is as it seems.

Wisdom of Solomon 3:1-5, 7-9

The souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and no torment will ever touch them. In the eyes of the foolish they seemed to have died, and their departure was thought to be an affliction, And their going from us to be their destruction; but they are at peace. For though in the sight of men they were punished, their hope is full of immortality. Having been disciplined a little, they will receive great good, because God tested them and found them worthy of God's self; In the time of their visitation they will shine forth, and will run like sparks through the stubble. They will govern nations and rule over peoples and the Lord will reign over them forever. Those who trust in him will understand truth, and the faithful will abide with him in love, because grace and mercy are upon God's elect, and God watches over them.