

Last week, on Reformation Sunday, I talked about the theme that ran through all of the readings for the day – the theme of freedom. This week, there is also common thread running through our texts – and that is death. Of course that's no surprise; it is the Feast of All Saints, when we remember those who have died. Anyone who has lost a loved one or comforted someone who has lost a loved one, anyone who has had to face death squarely in the eye (President Obama at Dover AFB) – can look to all of these passages for solace and reassurance of something more, something beyond this mortal coil.

Wisdom of Solomon: “the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God . . . they are at peace!”  
Revelation: “and death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more.”  
John: raising of Lazarus, the last of the seven miracles in John's gospel, signs of Jesus' messiahship, which shows Jesus' divine power over death itself.

On this day, we honor the lives of the saints – the “big name” ones as well as those ordinary saints of our own blessed memories. All Saints isn't one of the “Big 3” holy days of the church. Unlike Christmas/Easter/Pentecost, it doesn't celebrate a specific event (although you could say that that it encompasses all three). But in a way that maybe no other day does, All Saint taps into an existential dilemma each of us faces: what happens when we die? As Job asked: “If mortals die, will they live again?” Our faith tradition tells us “yes,” but in reality we don't usually like to think about death; at times we may even fall into a denial of death. But on this weekend (and I love the phrase that Jan Richardson *paintedprayerbook.org* uses: “this trinity of days, encompassing Halloween, All Saints' Day, and All Souls' Day”) we are given the opportunity to face our mortality.

I wonder if all the little ghost and goblins running around my neighborhood last night knew they were participating in an ancient religious ritual. After all, Halloween (or All Hallows' Eve) is to All Saints Day what Christmas Eve is to Christmas Day. It's part of an ancient Christian holiday, which goes back to the 4<sup>th</sup> century. Although it really goes further than that. Origins of the Day of the Dead tradition in Mexico can be traced to pre-Christian indigenous observances dating back thousands of years.

Also in pre-Christian Celtic culture, the festival of Samhain, honored the dead. The name means “summer's end” and it was believed that the border between the living and the dead became thin at that time. And wearing costumes and masks was an attempt to copy evil spirits. Lanterns carved from turnips were also used to ward off evil spirits. Large turnips were hollowed out, carved with faces and placed in windows. Sounds familiar, doesn't it?

With the coming of Christianity, the Celtic festival became associated with All Saints and All Souls Day. All Hallows' Eve emerged from the mythology and storytelling of the people as the night that the ghosts of the dead prowled the earth, waiting to be honored on the next two days. This was never a church-sanctioned part of the All Saints/All Souls observance, but it caught on in popular culture, and continues still, although again, I wonder how many of last night's trick-or-treaters were aware of the roots of their Halloween fun. Whether they were or not really doesn't matter. What matters is our recognition of the ancient and universal human desire to make sense out of death.

Christian teaching of course is quite clear about it, as Paul writes of the saving work of Jesus: “Death has been swallowed up in victory.” An article I read this week said, “When I’m sitting in the congregation on All Saints’ Day, here is what I’d like to hear: I want you, preacher, to bring me face to face with death and remind me (convince me?) that death is the enemy. Yes, the war has been won but the fight is not over and death is still a fearsome frontier.”

I’m going out on the heresy limb here and confess that I was stopped short by that article. I had to stop and ponder and ask myself, “Do I really believe that? Is death the enemy?” And the answer I came to was: it depends. When my 85-year-old mother was dying, I have to admit that I saw death more as a friend to her than an enemy. But when my friends’ 5-year-old son was removed from life support, then, yes, death was definitely the enemy. So I have to admit to some ambivalence about death. I will cry inconsolably at the death of pet, yet when I was in a serious car accident years ago, I felt perfectly calm about the possibility of my own death.

We know what we’re supposed to believe. We sing on Easter “Christ is risen, Alleluia! All the doubting and dejection of our trembling hearts have ceased.” But have they? And even if we do trust in life after death, still we wonder what that life will be like.

I don’t think I’m alone in my wondering. We’ve come a long way from belief in the 3-tiered universe of heaven/earth/hell. We don’t conceive of a heaven that’s out there somewhere in space, maybe just beyond the Milky Way. Our ever-increasing range of seeing into the universe has dispelled ideas of a place called heaven which exists in our conception of time and space. Many people have given up on religion because they can’t reconcile scientific discoveries with the patriarchal, omnipotent, judge-who-must-be-appeased god who lives and reigns up there somewhere - like Nikita Khrushchev, who said about Yuri Gagarin, the Soviet cosmonaut, “Gagarin flew into space, but didn’t see any God out there.”

If we hold to the old ways of thinking about God and heaven and the afterlife, we do bump up against modern science and evolving ways of thinking about our universe. I don’t understand quantum physics, but I do know that scientists are discovering things that change everything about the ways we envision our world, and actually affirm a vision of God that is more attuned mystics of all faiths. They are also changing the way we think about death – not as an enemy, but as an integral part of life. This new way was expressed probably most clearly by that great theologian, Yoda: “Death is a natural part of life. Rejoice for those around you who transform into the Force. Mourn them do not. Miss them do not.”

A real-life “character” John Shelby Spong, in his new book entitled *Eternal Life: A New Vision*, calls us to embrace death as a friend, not an enemy: “Death is as natural as our birth. Suppose there was no death. Our life would become an endless monotony—500,000 years of playing shuffleboard in a nursing home.” But, as an illustration of the divide in our thinking about death: he wanted to call the book *Dancing with Death*, but the publisher wouldn’t allow it. They said nobody would buy a book with the word “death” in the title. People are terrified of death. In other words, death is the enemy.

Well, as much as I can agree with Spong – to a point – I’m still left with ambivalence. Spong is 79 years old. His perspective is from a long and fulfilling life. 5-year-old Cody is a different story.

Where I end up is in facing the reality that death is. There is no denial of that, whether it's fair or not, whether we say, "why did she have to die so soon" or "why did he linger so long"). Death just is. Whether we believe in a literal heaven with golden streets or a quantum river to which our consciousness will return, it is still a very big deal. And we do mourn and miss those who have made that great transition. And we do wonder what it will be like for us. But for now, we just do not know.

At least we do not know the details. I appreciate the very end of Spong's book, after he's made his case for a new way of envisioning eternal life: "That is as far as words can carry me. I step beyond words at this point into the wonder of a wordless reality. Finally, to state it as plainly as I know how, I believe deeply that this life I love so passionately is not all there is; this life is not the end of life. I can't articulate the content of my conviction more than I have done. If someone asked me, as Job asked "If mortals die, will they live again?" my answer will be Yes! Yes! Yes!"

And so we honor our saints, who have claimed their "Yes!" - whatever that may be. We remember them and give thanks for their lives and their witness. And we wait for our transformation into the Force, whenever that may be, trusting that God is love, and that when our time comes, we will be welcomed into the great communion of saints with a resounding "Yes! Yes! Yes!"

Amen