

All Saints A  
Peace, Seattle  
November 2, 2014  
Revelation 7:9-17, Matthew 5:1-12

## **A JOURNEY THROUGH DARKNESS TO LIGHT**

**Jeffery Gusky was on a photo expedition in France several years ago when he stumbled upon the entrance to a long forgotten world underground.<sup>1</sup>**

Hidden under the former battlefields of World War 1 lie hundreds of forgotten rock quarries transformed into underground cities by armies on all sides. As he sought to uncover their story, Gusky, an American medical doctor, photographer and explorer, was allowed access to these underground cities by the landowners and volunteers who fiercely guard them to prevent vandalism and to preserve them for the future.

Frozen-in-time and cloaked in darkness, these cities beneath the trenches bristle with artifacts, sculptures and emotionally charged “graffiti,” forming a direct human connection to soldiers who lived and died a century ago.

These ancient rock quarries, which had provided the stone that built the castles and cathedrals of France, were connected to the trenches above, and became staging areas, hospitals, canteens and shelters from bombs. Some even have street signs and maps.<sup>2</sup>

**Dr. Gusky sees parallels between his work as a rural emergency physician and as a photographer.**

“There’s a realness to the experience of rural emergency medicine that I bring to the photography,” he says. **“It’s a journey through darkness to light, and always toward hope.**

The soldiers who lived and died in these places have a message for us, he says.

“They’re almost begging us to ask the questions about modern life that we’ve forgotten how to ask—how it affects our humanness. And we see on these walls a struggle to remain human in a world that had become inhuman.”

“When you’re underground in these places, and it’s completely dark,” says Gusky, “your headlamp shines on a particular part of the wall and there, looking back at you across a hundred years, is a signature of someone that looks like yesterday. It’s a very deeply moving thing because you feel like someone wanted to be known, they wanted to say, ‘I existed, I mattered, I was alive.’”<sup>3</sup>

**How much of what we do, of how we live, of what we leave behind is our way of leaving that testimonial trail. I exist, I matter, I am alive!**

**Today we celebrate all the saints, those known to us and those known only to God, who learned to lean on the promises of God for this life and the life to come.**

**If only they could speak to us now—what would they tell us? Toward what would they invite us? How might they encourage us, this great Cloud of Witnesses?**

**St. John knew.** In our first reading he writes to the seven churches of Asia Minor to share his vision about a great multitude from every tribe, people and language. There they stand before the throne and before the Lamb, praising God with hearts and hands and voices.

<sup>1</sup> Edited excerpts from Dr. Gusky’s story and his website are included here. To view his remarkable photographs go to: <http://jeffgusky.com/about/#hwofwwi>

<sup>2</sup> *The Hidden Cities of World War I*, Craig Allen, New York Times, Sep. 16, 2014 [http://lens.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/09/16/the-hidden-cities-of-world-war-one/?\\_r=0](http://lens.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/09/16/the-hidden-cities-of-world-war-one/?_r=0)

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

**These survivors of the great ordeal will don new robes, and find shelter there from all that threatened them in life.**

“For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

John shares his dream with a persecuted people who are struggling to survive the onslaught of an Empire that wishes to exterminate them, or, failing that, dominate them in every way it can—militarily, economically, culturally.

**And John’s message to them is clear:**

- The pain you’re experiencing is the birth pangs of something new that God is bringing to birth.
- Keep trusting in God’s presence and promise;
- Place your lives under the power of the Lamb who was slain and whom God has raised above all peoples, principalities and powers, for the final victory belongs to him.

**John tells the churches that the lives they live NOW can be lived without fear because the FUTURE belongs to God.**

**History records that not long after John wrote his Revelation a major plague devastated the Roman Empire beginning in 165.** Historians estimate that during the 15-year epidemic, between one-quarter and one-third of the empire’s population died. Then, in 251 a new epidemic swept through the Empire with equally devastating results.<sup>4</sup>

Voices from that time record that as many as 5,000 people A DAY were dying in the city of Rome at the height of the epidemics.

The anxiety that’s being experienced right now around the Ebola Virus—when we understand how the disease process works—pales in comparison to the anxiety that surely dominated the cities and towns where those early pandemics left their mark.

**In his book on Christian origins, Rodney Stark asserts that these pandemics provided unforeseen opportunities for the Christian values of love and charity to shine.<sup>5</sup>**

When those plagues hit, there was nothing within the pagan worldview that could incorporate that kind of devastation or fashion an adequate response to it. As a result, people abandoned their religious systems and the sick were unceremoniously dumped onto street to die without care.

The emerging Christian worldview, however, combined an ethic of compassionate care with a firm belief in “the life of the world to come” and this moved Christians to risk caring for victims without fear for their own futures. So they stayed with those who were struck down by the plagues, both fellow Christians and non-Christians, too, caring for those had been rejected and cast out.

The ironic result was that this deeply imbedded ethic of caring enabled Christian folk to survive the depredations of these plagues at higher rates than their fellow citizens. Their immunity increased, and their numbers grew.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: how the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries*. (San Francisco: Harper, 1996) p. 73.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. 74.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. 91f.

So remarkable was this Christian response in the face of these pandemics, that at least one pagan leader suggested that this Christian ethic of caring should be used as a model for non-Christians—even if their belief system should not.<sup>7</sup>

**Yes, the lives they lived NOW could be lived without fear because the FUTURE belongs to God.**

**The words of Jesus today speak to this reality.** His beatitudes are not a list of attributes one strives to emulate, but markers for blessings that, inexplicably, mysteriously, are available now. His declarations turn the world's logic upside down, and call us into the mystery of trusting the God who summons us from death to resurrection; the God who holds a future full of hope in his hands.

**Today, and indeed every time we gather around Word, Font, and Table, we are being called to celebrate that mystery.**

But, as Richard Rohrer writes, “We do not know how to stand [in that place of mystery] on our own. Someone Else needs to sustain us in such a deep and spacious place. This is what the saints mean by our emptiness, our poverty and our nothingness. They are not being negative or self-effacing, just utterly honest about their inner experience. God alone can sustain me in knowing and accepting that I am not a saint, not at all perfect, not very loving at all—and in that very recognition I can fall into the perfect love of God.”<sup>8</sup> Richard Rohrer.

**What happens to our loved ones when they complete their journey in this life?** The testimony of Scripture is that their lives are held in God. It's hard, at times, to get our minds around that mystery; what that looks like or how that could be. But again and again we are summoned to trust that **we are being led on a journey through darkness to light, a journey that always tends toward hope.**

**Sometimes, we're gifted with glimpses—moments when we touch that mystery along the way.**

A few weeks back I was going through some old pastoral care notes when I came upon a story that Lorraine Paulson shared with me nine years ago. Lorraine, some of you know, was one of the saints of Peace who was called home after a sudden illness 3½ years ago. This is the story Lorraine told:

“I was at church, going up to receive communion when I found myself compelled to make room for my mother to kneel beside me,” she said. “I could feel my mother's presence. When I returned home from church there were messages from her brother. My mother had passed away that morning. I asked my brother when it happened, and was told the particular hour. The time he told me matched exactly time I was going up to receive communion.”

When I shared this story with Lorraine's daughter, she wrote back to me, sharing sacred stories of her own encounters; stories testifying to the unfolding mystery of our journey toward light and hope.

As we come forward today to commune with Christ and to light candles of remembrance, we enter the territory of mystery. Surrounded here by the light no darkness can overcome, we'll join with the whole communion of saints, and add our testimony to theirs:

BLESSING AND GLORY AND WISDOM AND THANKSGIVING  
AND HONOR AND POWER AND MIGHT BE TO OUR GOD FOREVER AND EVER!

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 84.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Rohr's Daily Meditation, “*The Principle of Likeness: My Mystery Opens Me to God's Mystery*” Friday, 17 October 2014.

Amen?

Amen!