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All Saints
Peace, Seattle
November 4, 2018
Isaiah 25:6-9, Rev. 21:1-6a, John 11:32-44

TEARS

Did you see the tears?

Did you see them running down the cheeks of the multitudes on the mountain of the Lord? Big tears, copious tears; salty tears mingling with the rich foods and well-aged wines of the great heavenly banquet?

And did you watch as those tear-stained faces—brimming with a thousand centuries of grieving—were utterly and irrevocably transformed on that mountain, from symbols of pain into emblems of joy as they sang out:

THIS IS OUR GOD! OUR SAVIOR!
THIS IS THE LORD FOR WHOM WE HAVE BEEN WAITING!
LET US BE GLAD AND REJOICE IN GOD'S SALVATION!

And then, at last, did you see God take hold of that great sheet and shroud of death and lift it—turning it into the biggest hanky the world has ever known—and then kneel to wipe away those brimming tears from every single face—each one—and with them, death itself?

There's a trail of tears linking our scriptures this All Saints Sunday.

First Isaiah, then John, too, in the 21st chapter of his Revelation, envision that day, in the fullness of time, when God will give birth to a new heaven and new earth, and...

GOD HIMSELF WILL BE WITH US, WIPING AWAY EVERY TEAR FROM OUR EYES.

Two profound images from the 1st and 2nd readings, and yet a 3rd from John's gospel:

- Jesus, clustered with friends at the grave of Lazarus.
- Jesus, who chose to stay away even though he knew his friend's death was imminent.
- Jesus, face to face with Mary's grief, his own eyes filling with tears.

A trail of tears runs through the texts this morning...and to this trail we can add our own tears, can we not? Tears that flow from our inner, personal griefs and sorrows; tears at what unfolds around us in a world that has forgotten the sacred image of God residing in each and every person.

Of course, we cannot use the term "trail of tears" without speaking of the original Trail of Tears in this country.

Initiated by executive order, President Andrew Jackson's Indian removal policy compelled the Cherokee nation to give up lands east of the Mississippi and to migrate west to what is now Oklahoma. In the forced march that followed over one-quarter of the people lost their lives.

Those who survived called it THE TRAIL OF TEARS.[1]

[1]The Indian Removal Policy of 1830. For a fuller account of the history of the Trail of Tears from a Cherokee perspective, go to: http://webtest2.cherokee.org/About-The-Nation/History/Trail-of-Tears/A-Brief-History-of-the-Trail-of-Tears

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A film that begins airing tomorrow on PBS, called DAWNLAND, tells how tears of loss have been a continuous part of what it means to be Native American in this country—particularly for children who were forcibly separated from their families and communities.[2]

For most of the 20th century, government agents systematically forced Native American children from their homes and placed them with white families. Many children—not all—experienced devastating emotional and physical harm by adults who mistreated them and tried to erase their cultural identity.

Now, in the State of Maine, during the first government-sanctioned truth and reconciliation commission in the United States—these people were asked to share their stories for the first time.

Some tears we weep in life come from the experience of personal grief and loss, but how many more originate from systemic causes which run farther and deeper in a community's memory.

Last Monday I attended the VIGIL that was held at Temple de Hirsch Sinai[3] in response to the murder of 11 persons at Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburg.[4] I wore my clerical collar as a sign to that Jewish faith community that the Christian community I represented was present and in solidarity with them.

By the time I arrived the closest parking was ¼ mile away, and the line of people waiting to get in stretched around the entire block. When it became apparent that there was no more room inside the sanctuary, the thousand or more of us outside clustered together in front of the entrance. We sang songs, prayed prayers, listened to speakers, and joining together as one, repeated the name of each person slain as Rabbi Aaron Meyer read them aloud.

Two things Rabbi Meyer said have stayed with me. First, he reminded us that the Torah, in Genesis, declares that every human being carries within themselves the inviolable image of God. As we encounter each other in these deeply challenging times, he said, don't forget that.

Second, he told us that the words of the Mourner's Kaddish, sung in ancient Aramaic to honor the dead, does not speak of death at all, but rather of LIFE—a song of praise to an Almighty and All Merciful God.

As the Vigil was breaking up, I re-introduced myself to Rabbi Meyer and reminded him that we had brought our confirmation students to Temple de Hirsch in the past—and he, gracious as always, said he looked forward to welcoming us the next time we returned.

Part of what today is about is remembering all those servants of Christ—those sisters and brothers, mothers and fathers, friends and companions—who, in their living, gave us a glimpse (and sometimes more than a glimpse...) of what it means to be captive to an Almighty and Merciful God; a God of grace.

Some of their pictures are with us today, reminding us that we are part of a communion of saints whose legacy abides with us even though they are physically gone.

Recalling their lives today we are reminded that being a saint isn't about attaining perfection or having the answers to all of life's questions. Rather, it's about knowing who were are, and whose we are, and how we, like they, have been called in baptism and set apart for God's purposes in the world.

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[2] Go to: https://upstanderproject.org/dawnland/
[3] https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/thousands-gather-in-seattle-for-vigil-mourning-pittsburgh-synagogue-massacre/
[4] https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/27/us/mass-shootings-church-synagogue-temple.html?action=click&module=RelatedCoverage&pgtype=Article&region=Footer

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Today, sisters and brothers, we remember all those saints we have known, whose lives and tears have mingled with our own. And it's really no surprise that, for us who have been called to live "between God's grace and a broken world," tears are part and parcel of the arrangement.

"We carry the gospel treasure," Paul wrote, "in the clay jars of our lives."
Bearing the name of Christ implies a kind of shared vulnerability both with God and with each other. No disguises necessary. No masks required. Cracked and leaky vessels welcomed.

Two promises serve as a kind of yeast in this called-out and set-apart life we share, the life of saints.

The first is the promise that when tears are shed, they will not be shed alone.
This, it seems to me, is what the tears in John's gospel teach us this morning.

The God revealed to us in Jesus is a God who does not stay at a distance but enters fully into our human story with all its limitations; he weeps alongside us, feels our disappointment and pain, bears our wounds as his own. And he calls us into a community where tears can be shared.

With Mary and Martha we stand between death and resurrection. And with them we live in the presence of our brother and Lord, the crucified and Risen One. Daring to hope. Daring to believe that nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God who makes all things new.

Only when we grasp this first promise, will the second promise make sense:
The promise that God will wipe all tears away.

This promise, shimmering in Isaiah and Revelation, calls us to trustingly place our lives into the hands of the One who holds the future.

This promise proclaims that there is a particular trajectory to this unfolding story of which we're part; there is a goal and a fulfillment toward which the universe is moving—a trajectory not of entropy and ruin but of all-encompassing LOVE; a trajectory not of eternal death, but of eternal life.

And when the fullness of that day arrives, in that hour, God will come again and forever, to live among use, to wipe every tear from our eyes, and to make all things NEW.

To be saints, to be called in baptism and set aside for God's purposes is to live our lives between the poles of these two promises.

This morning, our journey leads once again to the Lord's Table.
- Where God promises are nurtured and renewed,
- Where time collapses, and the whole of God's people present, past, and future come together,
- Where the salt of our tears mingles with the sweet wine in a foretaste of the feast to come.

Here we take Jesus into our bodies: eating and drinking forgiveness, eating and drinking the empty tomb.

Here we come together to wipe away one another's tears and exchange all that binds us for a taste of a new heaven and a new earth. Amen.