

November 7<sup>th</sup>, 2021

## **Wisdom of Solomon 3:1-9, John 11:32-44 “Their Hope is Full of Immortality”**

Because we don't have a special service on All Saints Day like some churches, we honor our saints on the first Sunday *after* All Saints Day. The second scripture I chose for this morning's reading is only found in Catholic and Christian Orthodox bibles. It's part of a collection of books written in between the Old and New Testaments most commonly known as “The Apocrypha.” Early church councils who determined what books were to be included in the Bible had some serious questions about their authenticity. Sadly, the word “apocrypha” has become synonymous with “fabricated” or “lies” so whenever a preacher from a Protestant tradition wants to read them in church, there's the risk of being called a heretic. Two of my study bibles contain these books, but they're referred to as “deuterocanonical” which is a mouthful, but still sounds a heckuva lot better than “apocrypha.” And I'm not kidding you when I say I have to be really careful where I set these down because there are folks who might pick up one of those bibles, flip through them, see the extra books and then start praying for my soul on the spot. The problem is, I really enjoy some of these books. Two of them include my favorite stories about the prophet Daniel. And the Wisdom of Solomon has some really good discussion starters on all sorts of subjects including the afterlife, which is what I want to address this morning.

A couple of weeks ago I said that a great way to start a lively discussion in church is to bring up the subject of how God does or does not answer prayer. Here's another fun discussion starter for you. Bring up the afterlife. Have a little chat about what happens to a person when they die. Some people will argue that even though the Bible says very little about the afterlife, some Christian traditions put all their eggs in the afterlife basket. The criticism here is that people who put so much emphasis on securing their place in the afterlife often pay very little attention to how we should follow Jesus in *this* life. On the other end of

the spectrum are those who completely dismiss the afterlife. The criticism here is, “Maybe that’s fine for *you*, but there are a lot of less privileged people in this world whose lives are catastrophically tragic and whose only hope is the promise of a heavenly reward.” And it goes back and forth – “Yeah, well you use heaven and hell as a carrot and stick to coerce people into the faith” and then, “Oh yeah? Well, you make it seem like life is hopeless and that you can get away with anything because nothing really matters!” And the lively little discussion goes on and on until somebody’s feelings get hurt and the word “heretic” starts getting bounced around.

Here’s the reality, though. The Old Testament, which makes up the majority of what we call “The Bible,” really doesn’t say much about a conscious afterlife. It wasn’t until much later in the Hebrew scriptures that you started seeing attempts to flesh out a theology of the afterlife in some of the prophetic books. Things like, “What happens when you die? Is it nothingness? Heaven or hell? Judgment? Eternal rest? Inquiring minds want to know.” This is why I turned to *The Wisdom of Solomon* this morning, because even though it’s not in everyone’s bibles, this book has some pretty profound things to say about life after death.

One of the reasons most Bibles don’t include the *Wisdom of Solomon* has to do with its authorship and how late it was written. It’s not a book *of* wisdom like *Proverbs* or *Ecclesiastes*, it’s a book *about* wisdom and the pursuit of saving knowledge. It was clearly not written by Solomon. In fact, most scholars say it was written by a Greek speaking Jew with some knowledge of Greek philosophy and rhetoric. And even though the book says it’s addressed to “the rulers of the earth” it was most likely written to young Jews in the first or second century BCE who were slipping away from their Jewish heritage into Greco-Roman materialism. But what I want to focus on is the first 9 verses in chapter 3 which, in my Bible is called “The Destiny of the Righteous” which seems like a good passage to consider for All Saints Sunday.

“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 a disaster and their going from us to be their destruction; but they are at peace.” Shoot, I’d use that as an opening for a graveside service. In fact, I have! The lesson here is that the righteous belong to God, even in death. And what’s nice is that, for the most part, it addresses the concerns of both sides of the afterlife debate. There’s no carrot and stick here to coerce people into believing any specific kind of doctrine and there’s an acknowledgement that those who are tormented in this life have hope for immortality and peace. In this life there are tormentors (the ungodly) and the tormented (the godly.) In the next life the tormentors will be punished while the tormented will prosper and have peace. Pretty straightforward. Mind you, I could treat you all to a big analysis of eschatology and thanatology and how the Christian understanding of life after death is a merger of the Hebrew and Greek traditions, but I don’t want to put you to sleep ... especially since our biological clocks are just getting adjusted to the shift back to standard time. So, I’m just going to say that I affirm the afterlife. I’m not going to use this belief to dangle people over the fires of hell so I can get more money in the offering plate, nor will I dismiss anyone’s tragic circumstances to suggest that their suffering will go unrecognized by the One who created us, sustains us and walks with us through life’s trials.

So now that we’ve placed death and resurrection on the table, let’s take a look at the first scripture that Mary read from John 11. This is the story of Jesus raising his friend Lazarus from the dead. This passage contains the shortest verse in the Bible. John 11:35 – “Jesus wept.” At least that’s how the verse reads in the King James version. Even sweet, kind Eldora Flick, my childhood Vacation Bible School teacher, wouldn’t give out a Rice Krispy treat for a verse that short. The NRSV at least has a more accurate rendering of the original language – “Jesus began to weep,” but still, no prize.

Here's something that bothers folks about this whole story: By the time we get to verse 35, the author makes it clear that Jesus already knew Lazarus died and that he was going to raise his friend from the dead. The lectionary kind of chops this story in two, but right before we picked up this story in verse 32, Jesus told his disciples, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him." So, if Jesus knew he was going to raise Lazarus from the dead, what was he crying about? There's no Lazarus shaped hole that Jesus is going to have to live with for the rest of his life like when one of our loved ones die. Jesus knows Lazarus will be up and about after he sees him. So why shed any tears at all?

Well, the simplest and most common answer is probably at least partly true, and that is that Jesus is grieving over the continued intrusion of death into God's good creation. Even though this particular death will be reversed, at least for a time, Jesus still grieves the existence and continued impact of death. He feels the pain that it causes people and is angry at its continued capacity to tear people apart and devastate all that it visits. See, I like this notion because there are plenty of other places in the gospels that describe Jesus' compassionate identification with our pain. But there is something else too. Something that I think, in this situation, was unique to Jesus ... a grief that was his alone. Another thing that we don't get to see with this reading is that the corrupted chief priests and Pharisees held a council meeting and decided that they were going to arrange for Jesus to be killed. According to John's gospel, this was a direct response to Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. Bringing Lazarus to back to life was the trigger that set off the chain of events that led to Jesus being killed. And according to John's gospel, Jesus knew it would. He knew what this was going to cost him.

If you've read CS Lewis's book, *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe*, you'll remember that after the Lion, Aslan, has committed himself to die in place of Edmund, he becomes sad and depressed. He quits eating. He withdraws. He gets all moody. Well, wouldn't you? Just because you've accepted your death doesn't mean you welcome it. John is telling the

same story here. Aslan was saving Edmund from death, but only by resigning himself to meeting death in his place. Jesus is saving Lazarus from death, but only by resigning himself to meeting his death. And in this little story, we are seeing a snapshot of a bigger story: Jesus is saving us all from death by meeting death on our behalf. And so, Jesus wept. As we might under the same circumstances. If you came to our bible study on the John tradition a few years ago, you'd recognize that this is so "John!" Jesus takes on death in order to save us from death.

And yet despite all these tears being shed, there is a promise of a day when tears will "be wiped away and mourning and crying and pain will be no more." On that day we will be reunited with our loved ones and with the whole communion of saints who have gone before us, because how could every tear be wiped away and every grief banished if we were not. What's the phrase from that old hymn, "What a day of rejoicing that will be." But between here and there, between now and then, there will be tears. The good news is that in Christ, our griefs are gathered into his grief, and thus our griefs participate with his grieving.

In a little bit, Mary is going to lead us through a time of recognition for the people who died this past year who form what the church calls, "the great cloud of witnesses." And immediately after that, we'll gather around the Lord's table still surrounded by that great cloud of witnesses who have gone before us. Neither of those things will fill those holes that these various people have left. But here at the table, even our grieving, even the mix of fondness and sadness that our remembering may bring is all gathered up into the hope that we may be reunited again.

As Mary often reminds us – Grief is okay. It's normal. There is no shame in it. It's okay to grieve in protest against the lingering presence of death in this world. But offer your grief to God with the hope that all may be one again and that every tear may be wiped from our eyes, and death will be no more; that mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the old order will pass away to make way for the new.