North Kildonan United Church

31st October 2021 ~*Rev. Don Johnson*

Revelation 21: 1-6a John 11: 32-44

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen. (Psalm 19:14)

Earlier this week our Worship Committee met to do all those things that pertain to the mandate of the committee. In case you are curious, and might be interested in sometime joining us on the committee, we review past worship services and make plans for upcoming ones, we discuss the various parts of the service-music and hymns, the learning time with the children, the sacraments of Holy Communion and Holy Baptism, the organizing of seating in these pandemic days and the need for worshippers to not linger too long after worship (hint, hint!), as well as how the sanctuary should be decorated, especially with Christmas not all that far away, and other issues that might arise from time to time. Mercifully the preaching is not analysed too closely.

We begin the meeting with a question posed followed by each person answering as they see fit. Tuesday's question focussed on Halloween memories, and as always happens, there were some very funny responses.

It was only after the meeting when a few Halloween memories came to my mind. I thought of the time during my years in Toronto, when I went with a friend and his daughter as she made her Halloween rounds. At one home, the woman who answered the door was dressed as Marge Simpson, complete with a tall blue swirly wig. Very impressive.

Another home had a variety of the usual Halloween decorations, including headstones, carved pumpkins, cobwebs, witches, scary figures etc. on the front yard and on the house. Halfway up the yard was one of those scary figures, looking quite dead and totally motionless, seated on a bench and fitting in perfectly with the macabre scene. Just as the trick or treaters, if that's what we call them, headed towards the house, the actually very much alive scary figure gave a blast of an air horn and the kids all screamed.

All part of the fun of Halloween, I guess.

I'm always a bit amazed at the lengths some will go to in decorating their yard and their home for Halloween. As people buy plastic tombstones, devilish looking figures, huge inflatable spiders and other images of a Hollywood understanding of death, I wonder what is going on in their mind. I'm not here to be the Grinch who stole Halloween and far be it from me to tell other people how to spend their money, but honestly, what's this all about.

Remember, these are by and large the same people who can't say the word death or died. Instead, the closest they get to it is to say someone has passed, not passed on,

just passed. Passed where, we might wonder. The denial of death is everywhere nowadays, so perhaps this turning of the front yard into a graveyard is a manifestation of society's discomfort with that which ultimately awaits all of us.

At some point or other we are all challenged by death, by the death of a loved one or the threat to our own existence through illness, accident or malice. The genuine threat of Covid still brings to our minds and hearts the possibility and the reality of death in a profound way.

We are faced with death continually in the media. The other day, as I was watching something or other on Netflix, I was amazed at the number of violent deaths in the movie. We almost take such carnage for granted in some action movies, but then every so often there are exceptions that pull us up short. Back when Downton Abbey was popular, there was a motor car accident that took the life of Matthew, just as his future was showing such promise. Genuine outrage was generated by many viewers over the fact that such a scene could be written into the story. Yet, that death seemed real in a way that many other depictions of death on screen are not.

So we have this curious phenomenon. On any particular day, we are presented with depictions of death on TV, depending upon what you are watching. And yet, our culture denies the reality of death.

Our culture may deny death but our Christian faith does not. We are people who trust in the power of the resurrection, people who find strength in the Christian hope, people who find comfort in the love of God shown us in Jesus Christ.

Think of today's reading from John. Mary and Martha are beside themselves in grief at the death of their brother Lazarus. Lazarus has not passed, or passed away, like a ship setting sail some lovely evening, heading off to the sweet bye and bye. No, Lazarus is dead, he is in the tomb and it is not only his sisters who are the ones grieving. Their grief, combined with the reality of Lazarus's death, deeply moves Jesus and in the poignant words of the gospel "Jesus began to weep".

Let us be clear on this point. Jesus does not dismiss the pain of the mourners, but instead embraces it. Jesus is the man of sorrows, acquainted with our grief and pain, sharing and bearing it to the point of tears. And if Jesus is embracing our pain, crying along with us, so too might we picture God crying with the world's pain and suffering.

This is an important point. Tom Wright, in his commentary, says: "Throughout the gospel John is telling us something much more striking; that when we look at Jesus, *not least when we look at Jesus in tears,* we are seeing not just a flesh-and-blood human being but the Word made flesh. The Word, through whom the worlds were made, weeps like a baby at the grave of his friend. Only when we stop and ponder this will we understand the full mystery of John's gospel.

As Jesus begins to weep for Lazarus, perhaps he was also grieving for his own upcoming death. As Jesus wept, some denounced him, saying "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept his man from dying?"

The chief priests, scribes and elders would later mock Jesus with similar words: "He saved others, he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe him." (Matthew 27:42). It is through Jesus's death, through his own sharing of the common fate of humanity, that the world can be saved. The death of Lazarus is a foreshadowing of Christ's own death, which was soon to occur.

Jesus asked where Lazarus had been placed. They responded, "Lord, come and see."

"Come and see." John's gospel, in the first chapter, begins with this invitation Jesus made to the early disciples. Tom Wright offers this thought: "It is the simplest of invitations, and yet it goes to the heart of Christian faith. "Come and see" we might say to Jesus, as we lead him, all tears, to the place of our deepest grief and sorrow. "Come and see", he says to us in reply, as he leads us through the sorrow to the place where he now dwells in light and love and resurrection glory. And, even more evocative, in chapter 21, after the resurrection Jesus says "Come and have breakfast". The new day is dawning; and though where we live the night can be very dark, and the tears very bitter, there is light and joy waiting not far away."

So we gather this day, this curious time between All Hallows Eve, Halloween, with its mix of costumed children in search of candy and fun, surrounded by pretend death and scary beasties. But at the same time we mark All Saints Day, when the church remembers the faithful of all times and places, the grand and the glorious as well as the people we knew and loved. We know which is the more popular of the two observances but as Christian folk we also know which is the true celebration.

So we remember with gratitude those of our congregation, of our families, of our friends, whom we love but see no longer, those who shared and enriched and blessed our lives during their earthly pilgrimage and who now live secure in our Father's house. This is our hope, this is God's promise that in Jesus Christ God came to us, took our form, lived our life, suffered our death, faced and conquered our greatest enemy by rising from the tomb. And in the waters of baptism we receive the promise of new life, eternal life with Christ. This is the hope which gathers us together every Sunday but especially on this day when we remember and give thanks for those whom we so loved and whom, in the faith of Jesus Christ, we have entrusted to God's everlasting arms. That, my friends, is hope indeed.

Natalie Sleeth sums up hope this way, in words we soon sing:

In our end is our beginning;
in our time, infinity;
in our doubt there is believing;
in our life, eternity.
In our death, a resurrection;
at the last, a victory,
unrevealed until its season,
something God alone can see.

Let us keep silence as we remember those whom we love but see no longer.
Rest eternal grant unto them O Lord and let light perpetual shine upon them.
May they rest in peace and rise in glory.

We thank you, O God, for the saints of all ages; for those who, in times of darkness, kept the lamp of faith burning; for the great souls who saw visions of larger truth and dared to declare it; for the multitude of quiet and gracious souls whose presence has purified and sanctified the world; and those we knew and loved, who have passed from this earthly fellowship into the fuller light of life with you. Amen.