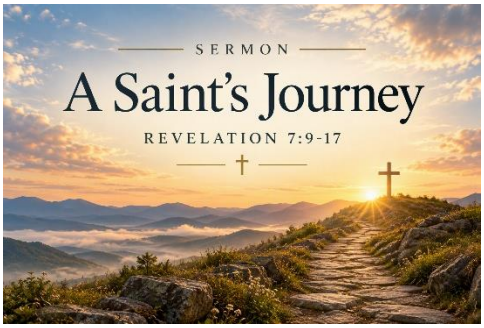


I still remember our preaching class in seminary, including the day when we were to dive into the expectations for us preachers with funerals. And one of my classmates was one of those students who didn't always participate in class, but when he did, it was going to stick more than just in that particular moment in the room. The discussion was ensuing about the relatively recent trend of shifting the name: from funerals or memorial services to celebrations of life. And he brought up how he recently attended such a named gathering after someone who was near and dear to him died rather unexpectedly, but it wasn't just the bulletin heading of it all, or the welcome extended by the pastor to the assembly; it was all shaped to be a celebration: a complete focus on the individual being in the heavenly realm and that all was well and good now. And I still remember my classmate saying, "Just let me be sad. Don't tell me to be happy now. This sucks. Let me be sad." A remarkable take for someone on their way to proclaim a Resurrection Gospel to children of God in a variety of not-always-the-happiest circumstances. But sometimes that reality check serves as a helpful reminder to the church, including for such weekends as this.

Now, our seminary class was an interesting combination of some of us straight out of college, others after a different career path or two taken before, and even a couple with a little more…life experience than the rest of us, who could have very well dropped out of the workforce entirely, but still felt this insistent pull from the Divine, as if they were not meant to be done just yet. However, with the 30 or so of us, the most fascinating journey of all might just have been taken by Elaina. She had a previous master's degree in Chinese History of all things, spent some time in social work, and bought herself a Harley Davidson motorcycle just before starting seminary. And then, she had us all beat when it came to where she served her year of internship: in none other than Mexico City. If there was a pastor who could talk to anyone about anything, it was Elaina. She ended up being called to a church in Massillon, and, of course, she brought her Harley along with her; ended up serving as a chaplain for the Blue Knights Motorcycle Club of Stark County.

And then, the unthinkable happened. Elaina was diagnosed with colon cancer; Stage IV, incurable, at that, at 37 years young. It was flat-out horrible.

But in the midst of all that, she felt called to write out her final chapter of her earthly journey to share it with others of similar fate, as there seem to be more and more of such terminal cases emerging now. To help the people with not the most positive outlook, at least medically speaking, who had to hear others' standard human clichés with the most well intentions behind them, but may not always exactly be what the person who is suffering needs to hear at the moment, the ones who don't always feel like celebrating life, let's say. At one point, Elaina wrote:

Yep, I have a list of ridiculous things that people have said to me…and they weigh on my heart. It's terrible, but true. It's hard to hear the pessimism of doctors over and over again. It's hard to hear the statistics. It's hard to keep my life in focus.

But, then again, I have also had friends and family, parishioners and strangers, loved ones and co-workers who have eased this weight with other words…and sometimes it's even the words that aren't spoken that ease the weight the most.

I have a mother who comes and sits with me through every single round of chemo. We sit there playing cards hour after hour…Gin Rummy is our game. She also beats me at every single game!

She has no pity. (And I have cancer, for heaven's sake; you'd think she could throw a game here or there!)
I have two amazing sisters: one who calls me from Texas every single day. Just to see how I am, just to show her support, just to make me feel like she doesn't live quite so far away. And a sister who randomly cooks me soups she makes up the recipes for. One who listens to me wallow, but who also doesn't let me wallow too long.
I have a dad who tells me how proud he is of me.
I have a friend who tells me, "Who is man to call something incurable?" I like that.
I have parishioners who tell me that I am a wonderful witness. I don't really know how to take that, but nonetheless.
I have a best friend who refuses to let cancer become the center of our relationship. It's not. We are.
I've had random people I've never met before walk up to me on the streets of Massillon, ask if I'm the pastor at [that church over there] ...and when I respond that I am, they tell me that they've been praying for me.
These are just a few of the folks who have chosen to bear some of this weight with me: to walk with me.
And yet there is another whose words not only help to bear the weight of the words in this world, but who actually takes on the entirety of the weight. Sometimes I forget in the massive onslaught of words I hear from the doctors—and in the statistics—but God is speaking too. Then again, sometimes, maybe I just forget to listen.
For I have a God who is telling me profound things. I have a God who tells me that I am not alone. And I have a God who promises to suffer with me in this world.
God has called me to service in this world and shown me again and again that it is not the cure for cancer that I am called to seek. I seek God.

And safe to say, Elaina had God all along. She didn't have to seek God. The Divine was already there from the beginning. That's the beauty of this All Saints celebration: to remind not just the family of those who have recently died, but to remind all of us, that our identity as saints is forever emblazoned in the depths of our being, not because we did this or that, but because God did a holy this on Calvary, and God did a holy that in our emerging into this rather interesting terrain of a world.

Doesn't mean there won't be struggles, to say the least. But I like to think one of the powerful verses we often hear on this All Saints Sunday is from Revelation: that God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. But it isn't just about the Divine doing so when we finally reach a paradise of the fullest peace and harmony, to not have to deal with the suffering and the anger and the frustration and hatred anymore. It's about God ensuring that the tears experienced in this life will not cloud over vision entirely, to not take for granted the parent playing cards, the sibling on the phone, the friend who won't allow the disease to define you who are; that God will not allow the tears to cloud us from seeing the Risen Christ emerging right then and there, because nothing, not even death is meant to ever happen in this life to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord. And for that Greatest News for us and all the saints, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen!