All Saints Sunday

Is.25:6-9 Ps. 24 Rev. 21:1-6a Jn.11:32-44

A sermon given by Pastor Elaine Hewes

St. Brendan Episcopal Church 11-3-24

This past Wednesday, after visiting my 99 year-old-father for a few days in St. Charles, Illinois, I spent part of the morning at O'Hare waiting for my flight back to Maine. I'm a person who likes to be at the airport ridiculously early, and so I often have a good deal of time to work on sermons and such while I sit at the gate waiting to board the plane.

So this past Wednesday, I was listening to music with my ear buds and trying to read a commentary on our text from the book of Revelation, but found it difficult to do so because…

- the voice over the loudspeaker kept warning us about leaving our bags unattended or accepting a bag from someone we didn't know,
- and the TV screens kept replaying images of screaming politicians, and the latest massacre in Gaza, and the flooding in Spain,
- and a mother and father kept trying to coral their four lively children, all of whom were running around in their bright blue "Make a Wish" t-shirts, indicating that one of the children must have had cancer or some other life-threatening condition…

It was an overload of reminders about the times in which we're living, fraught as they are with so much fear and suffering, hatred and loss and death… When all of a sudden, from my ear buds there came the sound of a song one of my children had added to my

Spodify play-list without my knowing it… the sound of Itzhak Pearlman playing the excruciatingly beautiful theme song from the movie “Schindler’s List”… the movie that chronicles Arthur Schindler’s efforts to save hundreds of Jewish lives from the gas chambers of Nazi Germany…

I listened to the song again and again, and then, after returning to my study of the book of Revelation with its strange and disturbing images of seven-horned dragons and violence and bloodshed, **alongside** texts like the one appointed for this morning with its promise of the day when God will dwell with God’s people, wiping away all tears and sorrow, banishing death forevermore and making all things new, I scribbled this in my journal,

I’m sitting at Gate 8 in terminal C at O’Hare International Airport, surrounded by reminders of the suffering world in which we live, reading a commentary on the bizarre and frightening book of Revelation and listening with my ear buds to Itzhak Pearlman play the theme from ‘Schindler’s List,’ when I realize that this is exactly what the book of Revelation intends to be for those who live in a world where everything is falling apart… an aching, devastating drawing of the bow across the string that dares suggest the possibility of something stirring even in the most terrifying and horrific of circumstances…

As if to say there is something inside and beyond what is visible to the eye –

a movement,

a sound,

a song,

a vibration,

an impulse,

waiting for our raw braille fingers

to sense its presence

and to trust its promise…

waiting for us to take it in

and to bear witness to its power…

Despite everything we have ever heard about the book of Revelation being a futuristic telling of the glories that await those who have been faithful to Jesus while the unrighteous ones will be "left behind" in endless travail, it was intended to be nothing of the sort… but rather a vision of hope for marginalized and persecuted Christian communities in the waning years of the first century who were suffering under the brutal thumb of the Roman Empire…

It is a text full of apocalyptic images detailing the battle between good and evil, and promising that in the end, goodness and righteousness will prevail, not through "might" and "strength" and "power" as the world understands those words, but through the kind of power and strength made known in the one who sits on the throne… the lamb who was slain, and whose promised reign would, by the power of love and compassion and mercy, undermine and disarm all forces of brutality, death-dealing, violence and hatred.

Like Itzhak Pearlman playing the theme song from "Schindler's List" alongside black-and-white images of millions of people being led to the slaughter… and like the light in the rusty old tin can that can't yet be seen… this morning's text from Revelation suggests that *there is something inside and beyond what is visible to the eye –*

a movement,

a sound,

a song,

a vibration,

an impulse,

waiting for our raw braille fingers

to sense its presence

and to trust its promise…

waiting for us to take it in

and to make its power known…

This text from Revelation, along with this morning's texts from Isaiah and from the Gospel of John are perfect texts for All Saints Sunday, all three of them offering visions of hope, despite all evidence to the contrary, for the marginalized, dis-spirited and fearful communities for which they were written… All of them, in their own way, speaking of a power that is stronger than death, and coming in ways no one would ever expect…

And so offering us the same as we gather this morning

- in the growing darkness of winter,
- in a perilous and uncertain time in our country and our world,
- in a stage of life for many of us that brings health issues and limitations,

- and on a day when we take time to mourn, to name, and to light a candle for those saints in our lives who have died, leaving for some of us the unrelenting ache of grief…

All of the above leading us to wonder perhaps if our raw braille fingers will sense anything in this time and this place we might call "hope"…

Indeed, these are perfect texts for All Saints Sunday as they invite us to **look back** over our lives and to give thanks for those "saints" who have helped us to trust the light that shines in the darkness even when it's nowhere to be seen… and as we **look forward** to that time when all of creation will be gathered in the fullness of God's love made known in Jesus…

But we miss the point of the day and of our texts if we don't recognize that the hope being offered to us today is not only

waiting for our raw braille fingers

to sense its presence

and to trust its promise…

but is also waiting for us to take it in

and to make its power known…

In this present moment… in the fears and anxieties of our day…

Raising the question for us about just how we might go about doing so and just what it might look like…

And bringing to mind for me a gathering of Episcopal clergy in Waterville a week ago Thursday during which we heard Bishop Rob Wright, Episcopal Bishop of Atlanta, speak about the way Jesus is often times portrayed in our culture today in contrast to the Jesus we actually come to know in Scripture…

- the Jesus who welcomed all people to the table no matter their ethnic backgrounds, their political affiliations or their religious beliefs…
- the Jesus who identified with the poor, the oppressed and the marginalized…
- the Jesus who challenged unjust systems of economic and religious power…
- the Jesus who, in the face of ridicule, scorn and death, responded with "lamb-power"… the power of compassion, mercy, and love…

And while much of what Bishop Wright said gave all of us clergy a good deal to ponder, one point struck me particularly powerfully… And that was his reminder to us that Jesus met the powers that be in his day head-on, not by using their same tactics of intimidation, fear, coercion, and violence, but by using his **prophetic imagination to disarm and undermine the systems that had long held people in bondage…**

Whether he was speaking with political and religious authorities, challenging religious rules, or facing those who were dead-set on bringing him down, Jesus always responded by telling stories, sharing bread, extending the table, healing the sick, raising the dead, and speaking a word of forgiveness…even to those who persecuted him… Every one of those acts disarming and undermining the powers that be, **and providing for those who would follow him a totally**

different way of responding to the principalities and powers of their own day…

Like Fannie Lou Hammer, who after being beaten and jailed in the 1960's for her efforts to get folks registered to vote, stood in her jail cell (because sitting was too painful), and sang… Fannie Lou Hammer sang, her song being picked up by others in the jail house until the whole place was like *an aching, devastating drawing of the bow across the string that dared suggest the possibility of something stirring even in the most terrifying and horrific of circumstances…*

Or like Elise and Otto Hampl, German citizens during the Third Reich, who in an act of resistance to Hitler's policies wrote hundreds and hundreds of postcards offering messages counter to German propaganda, placing those postcards all over Berlin, over many months' time… placing them in library books, on park benches, under canned goods in the grocery stores, and behind hymnals in German churches… Otto and Elise Hampl eventually being caught and executed for their imaginative and disarming witness to the light that shines in the darkness… a light that shines to this day because we are still telling their story…

Or like those across our country this day who are opening their homes for what's being called "kitchen table conversations," in which people of differing political opinions are learning to listen to one another, to speak their truths in love, to share their struggles and losses and pain, and to begin to see one another not as "other," but as sister and brother, despite all efforts to pit folks against one another in the "great divide."

Or like my friend Jane, who, after an altercation between us over fifty years ago, left the last rose of summer on my desk with the simple note, "Love, Jane"…. A gift that continues to disarm and

undermine the self-righteous and judgmental Elaine again and again and again…

I don't need to tell you that we have an election here in the United States on Tuesday… I don't need to tell you that there is a great deal of uncertainty and fear about what that election might bring…

I don't need to tell you that there are horrors of apocalyptic proportion unfolding in Gaza, or that war is still raging in Ukraine, or that in Sudan the civilian population is experiencing unimaginable horrors…

I don't need to tell you that in our own bodies, our own families, our own communities, it feels like everything is falling apart….

But on this All Saints Sunday, what I need to tell you is that this is not all there is to say… What I need to tell you is what the story of our faith tells us and that is…

There is something inside and beyond what is visible to the eye –

a movement,

a sound,

a song,

a vibration,

an impulse,

waiting for our raw braille fingers

to sense its presence

and to trust its promise…

waiting for us to take it in

and to make its power known…

And its name is love…

Even now, says poet Irene Zimmerman, this presence, this love, is "Eastering back behind our lines of endless defences"… "Eastering back behind our lines of endless defences" to inaugurate a reign of peace, a reign of justice, a reign of dignity for all people and well-being for all of creation…

Even now this presence is using "lamb-power"… "Jesus power" to disarm and undermine the forces of hatred and violence and fear…

Even now this presence is coming to each of us, whether we are standing outside a tomb weeping for a loved one who has died, or whether we are inside the tomb tightly held in bondage to our fears and grief and shame… Even now this presence is coming to speak those words of liberation, **"Unbind him and let him go"… "Unbind her and let her go"…**

So we too can go into this time, this week, this world, trusting in the love that is stronger than death, and like the Saints before us, we can draw the bow across the string… we can lift our voices and sing… we can make postcards and leave them all over town… we can invite someone to the table whose bumper sticker drives us crazy… we can bring the last rose of summer to someone with whom we've had an altercation…we can point to the light even when it's imperceptible…

In other words, we can bear witness to the **real** Jesus… The **real** Jesus, whose crucified and risen presence is, even now moving around and within us,

waiting for our raw braille fingers

to sense his presence

and to trust his promise…

waiting for us to take his spirit in,

and along with all the Saints of God,

to make the power of his disarming, undermining, fierce and tender love known…