

Friends on the Other Side - Sermon, Bill Cocks, November 4, 2018

Do you ever despair when you hear the news of the day? Another shooting, a rude or insensitive tweet by Donald Trump or some other troll, some bureaucratic snafu by the government that defies common sense. Do you ever want to rail against such horrors, such nonsense? How can this be? Why does God let such things happen? What can I possibly do to make a difference?

Make no mistake about it - evil is at work in the world. Does this evil have an author, a source, a proponent? Do you believe in the Devil? Do you give him a name: Satan, the Prince of Darkness, the Anti-Christ? How does the Devil operate? How many of you are familiar with 'the Screwtape Letters' by C.S. Lewis? Let me describe it for you: Screwtape, an experienced demon/tempter, guides an inexperienced demon/tempter, in his efforts to draw his assigned patient away from the Enemy (God) and claim him for the Underworld (Hell). Screwtape does this in a series of letters to his nephew, Wormwood, and here are a couple of well known quotes from these letters to give you an idea of how C.S. Lewis thinks the Devil works in the world:

1. "It does not matter how small the sins are provided that their cumulative effect is to edge the man away from the Light and out into the Nothing. Murder is no better than cards, if cards can do the trick.

Indeed the safest road to Hell is the gradual one...."

2. "It is funny how mortals always picture us as putting things into their minds. In reality our best work is done by keeping things out."
3. "Suspicion often creates what it suspects."
4. "Do not be deceived, Wormwood. Our cause is never more in danger than when a human, no longer desiring, but still intending, to do our Enemy's will, looks round upon a universe from which every trace of Him seems to have vanished, and asks why he has been forsaken, and still obeys." (Surely this is us, Satan's most feared enemy - the ones who fear all is lost and yet we remain faithful to the Truth.)

So the Devil didn't make Robert Bowers shoot those innocent people at prayer in the Tree of Life Synagogue. No, the Prince of Darkness only sewed the seeds of ignorance and suspicion that allowed his plan to take root and grow into the monstrous act that took place. Chaos and confusion are his delight and the fertile field in which the power of darkness grows and has its own awful way with the world.

Do you believe in the Spirit World? Or is that going too far down an uncertain road? Do you believe in the saints? Try that on for size. Do you believe that those who have gone before us, though their bodies have died, yet they live in the Realm of Eternal Light? We're singing about them a lot

this morning. I hope you're paying attention to the hymns I've selected.

We don't typically make much of the Spirit World. After all, we're Presbyterians; cool, rational Calvinists dealing in the here and now. We have a bit of fun with Halloween but that's just so much childish silliness, some candy, some costumes, some scares but nothing to take seriously. But what about those Mexicans and *Dia de los Muertos*? November 2nd, All Souls Day, but it really begins on Halloween (Oct. 31st), runs through All Saints Day (Nov. 1st) and carries on to All Souls Day (Nov. 2nd) - this has been recognized by UNESCO as a holiday of cultural significance. The theme may be death but the point is to demonstrate love and respect for the deceased loved ones. Mourning is regarded as disrespectful, both of the dead and God. Death is a natural culmination in life's long continuum and so it is celebrated with colourful *calaveras* (skulls) and *calacas* (skeletons), *Catrina* (the rich, dead, hat lady), *papel picado* (pierced paper), trails of marigolds leading the dead back to their resting places in the cemetery, *pan de muerto* (sweet bread for the dead) left at *ofrenda* (altars to welcome the dead), and all night vigils in cemeteries to honour and celebrate the dearly departed. This is all very real and joyous to the Mexicans!

I know I shouldn't do what I'm about to do but I'm not a trained preacher; I'm an amateur, who has never done this before and who may never do it

again, so I'm going to reference another chapter of Revelation before I turn to the readings of the day. Listen as I read from Revelation 7: 9-10:

"..I looked again, and before my eyes appeared a vast crowd beyond man's power to number. They came from every nation and tribe and people and language, and they stood before the throne of the Lamb, dressed in white robes with palm-branches in their hands. With a great voice they shouted these words: 'Salvation belongs to our God who sits upon the throne and to the Lamb?'" Now there's a vision for you.

These are our "Friends on the Other Side". And while we may not be able to see them or touch them, we know that they are there. We can speak to them, invoke their aid, yet we may not hear them audibly answer us or observe them physically. Still they instruct us, support us, pray for us.

"Children of Israel" (that's you) - Do not despair in the face of evil, ignorance and inaction! God is on our side and Jesus, the very Lamb of God, has gone before us. Raised from the dead He leads the host of heaven, who are, by their lives here on earth, our great exemplar, and who continuously intercede for us with our Father In Heaven.

But I digress. Let us return to our Lesson for today in Revelation Chapter 21:1-5:

Then I saw a new Heaven and a new earth, for the first Heaven and

the first earth had disappeared and the sea was no more. I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, descending from God out of Heaven, prepared as a bride dressed in beauty for her husband.

Then I heard a great voice from the throne crying,

“See! The home of God is with men (and women), and he will live among them. They shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them , and will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death shall be no more... See, I am making all things new!”

Hallelujah! What good news is that?!?! God is with us, here and now - living with us every day. Not just in heaven, leading the celestial choir; but here on earth, his creation, and in our hearts and minds, his creatures.

Let us now turn to the Gospel of St. John, Chapter 11:

So in answer to Mary, who said: “If only you had been here, Lord, my brother would never have died.”

And in defiance of Martha, her sister, who said: “But Lord, he has been dead four days. By this time he will be decaying...”

Jesus went to the tomb and called out in a loud voice: “Lazarus, come out!” And the dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with grave-clothes... “Now unbind him,” Jesus told them, “and let him go

home.”

This is Jesus, the Christ; in the name of God, the Father Almighty, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, calling to us to come out of our self created graves; where we tarry, yea even cower, in our silos of fear and doubt; calling us to return to life, to help our neighbours remove their own grave-clothes of wilful blindness and inertia. The Saints may be cheering us on from beyond the Veil, but it is we who must rise up and do what we can to assist in God’s plan of redemption and resurrection. Death should no longer terrify us; not the death of the loved ones, the Saints we remember today, nor our own death. And neither should the life we share here and now terrify us. The massacre of innocents, the politics of fear and division, the darkness of ignorance and the dissemination of fake news - these heart wrenching elements of our life in the world do not have the final say and we must provide witness to the True Life and take action in Love that runs contrary to the testimony of this world.

God, the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, still needs us, wants us and invites us to be his partners in “making all things new.”

AMEN