31st Sunday in Ordinary Time (All Saints Day), Cycle B
1 November 2009, Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church, Charlotte, NC
*Isaiah 25:6-9
Psalm 24
*Revelation 21.1-6a
John 11.32-44

Prayer for Illumination– *God of mercy, you promised never to break your covenant with us. Amid all the changing words of our generation, may we hear your eternal Word that does not change. Then may we respond to your gracious promises with faithful and obedient lives; through Jesus Christ who is our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.*

A Homecoming

Preaching in November is always a little awkward for me. We Presbyterians by and large don't quite know what to do with All Saints Day, especially since it comes on the heels of Reformation Sunday when we celebrate our own heritage in a tradition that at its beginning posited a re-formation of life in the mother church. By the end of the month we celebrate the end of the church year with Christ the King Sunday, which always seemed a little too triumphant for me (although one congregation I served used that day to focus on what it called the Festival of the Earth). Advent then looms right around the corner, and the cycle begins again as we tell the story of the how the Christchild represents the light coming into the darkness of a world that continues to stand in need of hope and healing. Throw in Thanksgiving and our tendency to read the story from only the standpoint of one group of the characters while downplaying the impact of that history on Native Americans, and I have not always been sure how to proceed even as winter begins to settle in and rhythms of life begin to change for a time.

So it is that we find ourselves gathered for worship in a tradition that claims to be "reformed and always reforming," and you have chosen today to bring your *ofrendas* to a Day of the Dead altar, which would have made many past missionaries and converts to Protestantism in Mexico turn over in their graves. When I worked there as a seminary intern now two and a half decades ago, evangelicals of all stripes were still defined as much by what they didn't do as by the Bibles they carried in their hands on the way to Sunday services. And one thing they didn't do was eat Bread of the Dead (Dead Bread as we call in English) or celebrate El Día de los Muertos. And here, All Saints was usually seen as a time to remember those church members who had left us in the prior year, and at best a reading of their names seemed sufficient. When we did celebrate communion at times it reminded us of our connection with the "cloud of witnesses" that had gone before, but that was about as far as it went it seems.

But I think you are on to something here, because we may well be impoverished at times by the relative lack of symbols in our Presbyterian churches. And this holding in tension of Reformation and celebration of All Saints through an acknowledgment of the Day of the Dead demonstrates a desire to hold in tension ways of celebrating that often haven't gone together in our tradition. And perhaps it is that honoring our own tradition

while reaching out to others is what we need today as we search for signs of wholeness in a world where far too much of what drives us is based on fear and uncertainty, which too easily make violence and exclusion the anecdote to our encounters with threats both real and imagined. Perhaps there are no easy answers, but maybe our task is one of rasing more profound questions–about war and its consequences for others as well as ourselves; about immigration and a recognition that our Christian tradition insists that showing hospitality to "the least of these" is one aspect of the essence of who we say we are; about health care as a right rather than as something that is rationed on the basis of who can afford it.

The Gospel sets the tone; one cannot help but see this resurrection of Lazarus and wonder about what it means to raise such concerns. "'Unbind him and let him go,'" Jesus says as Lazarus comes to the door of the tomb. For all those who link their destiny to this Jesus, then miracle points us in the direction of these signs of Jesus does in our midst, signs that always point back to the creating and sustaining God who sends him into our midst as a word become flesh–and this opens us to the possibility of both resurrection and participation in the new heaven and the new earth.[1] Even in the face of some kind of apocalyptic judgment, perhaps even the very threat of exile itself, there is the promise of restoration.

> On this mountain, for all peoples, / [the LORD] is preparing/ a banquet of rich food, a banquet of fine wines/ . . ./ [the LORD] has destroyed death forever./ [God] has wiped away the tears from every cheek;/ [the LORD] has taken [the] people's shame away everywhere on earth. (Isaiah 25.6, 8)

Too much shallow Christian theology these days focuses on judgment or some fantastic ending to the last days, and this spills over into popular culture. By now you have seen the trailers for a movie, 2012, which reflects the end of what is called the long count for Guatemala's indigenous Maya population and turns it into yet another disaster movie about a day of reckoning. This kind of presentation, like that of the Left Behind series of books and movies, obscures more than it reveals. Ultimately, unless we are really good teachers for the next generation we run the risk that our young will imbibe too many distorted images of our own or other traditions, and it will be hard for them know truth when they encounter it. Apocalyptic is supposed to reveal something hidden, and one scholar Maya reminds us that in the marking of time in his culture "Maya thought, in terms of interrelation, is a response to these prophetic cycles that remind us that we are human, that we depend on the earth and all that exists on it."[2]

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[1]The play on signs and the pointing back to "the Father" here is taken from commentary in Raymond E. Brown, 1966, *The Gospel according to John I-XII,* Anchor Bible 29, Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, 436.

[2]Victor Montejo, 2005, *Maya intellectual renaissance: Identity, representation, and leadership,* Austin: University of Texas Press, 122. Cited in C. Mathews Samson, 2007, *Re-enchanting the world: Maya Protestantism in the Guatemalan highlands,* Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 88.

A focus on the notion of interrelation, then, brings our ecological concern to the fore, even as it reminds us that we human beings of flesh and bone are bound to each other–locally and globally–as well as to the creation. Can our proclamation in the church truly be one that emphasizes human dignity, this notion that indeed shame has been removed from the human family and tears have been wiped away? In our tradition we affirm that it is God's grace that does this, yet our task is to testify–to bear witness to the image of a beloved community challenging the notion of there can be crucified people who are simply the natural by-product of a global economic system makes cheap labor a commodity and laborers expendable. What would it mean if saw undocumented immigration, on one hand, and home foreclosures and rising unemployment, on the other, as part of the same broken system that too often dehumanizes and de-dignifies people rather than lifts them up as part of the same human family.

There is an awkward part of the Isaiah passage–a reference to a veil or a shroud or a covering being removed from the peoples to pave the way for death's destruction. If we dare to envision a world where everyone has dignity, then perhaps the commentators are correct in referring to this as a veil of mourning that will be removed when the little deaths that we die each day become a thing of the past.

Yet, you worship in a congregation where you are on a pilgrimage of bringing together traditions and cultures that in the not-to-distant past might have been at enmity. And so it is that creativity, then, in understanding and responding to the human condition writ large and to the life and work of this and all particular congregations seems to be the order of the day early in this 21st century. The altar and the table do, in fact, take their places together, and if we tend at times to give more attention to the human pilgrimage through life to death, the affirmation in the tradition of Jerusalem is that death is not the last word; the table itself becomes feasting place with saints (and sinners) gathered from all times and places. Let us be clear that this is neither some denial or death itself or of the pain of death whether it be a literal death before one's time or a death of opportunity and dreams brought about poverty or some other form of exclusion or marginalization. We also know that even our remembrance of those who have gone before is not always pleasant.

Still the prophetic vision that promises an end to both death and tears moves us. In the words of Norman Wirzba who teaches in the area of environmental theology at Duke,

> There would, of course, be no need for prophecy if what the prophet speaks against were not so attractive or tempting. . . . [A]s the Jewish prophets make abundantly clear, it often takes the experience of exile and homeland destruction to demonstrate the illusory character of human power and wealth. . . . Human rebellion against God certainly results in the distortion of our own identities and vocation. But it also leads to the exhaustion, pollution, and destruction of the creation as a whole.

> This is why some of the prophets do not simply stop at the restoration of the nation of Israel but go on to the restoration of creation itself.[3]

Apocalyptic, in this sense, is about restoration, not destruction.[4] And the issue becomes one of how we can bring disparate traditions and make an authentic proclamation of something new. Or perhaps go on a mission trip and realize the we might be the ones who return evangelized from a place like Guatemala where ethnic conflict runs as deeply as in our own context and where the effort to construct a new society in the wake of a devastating war continues to be tenuous a dozen years after the formal end of the conflict.

Perhaps the force of the Day of the Dead reminds us both of from where we have come and of those who have made us who we are.

> . . . [D]on Chalo sat in his airy wooden house. He had patiently gone about his chores all day, waiting, reheating the coffee and tamales, and waiting some more. Finally he seemed to be growing impatient. Many dead had already come and gone, but the only one that really counted had not yet returned. Thoughts tumbled through his mind like water in a shallow mountain stream. Was she angry with him? Did something happen to her in the Valley of the Dead? He stood hesitantly and ambled over to the altar where the tamales and coffee grew cold in their vigil. Because he was hungry and because tamales were a rare treat, he picked one up, peeled the corn husk wrapping from it, and eagerly ate it. Although his neighbor had prepared them for the dead, he was certain that they would understand, for they, too, had once been alive. To be sure, he had eaten a few of the tamales, and he should have had on the altar several additional candles, as well as some picture of his wife, but the dead fully understood the weaknesses and the difficulties of the living. Surely, they, including his wife, would see the goodness of his intentions and, thus, feel sufficiently remembered. They would seek no retribution. But to ease his doubts, he went to the hearth and brought a pot of freshly steamed tamales and placed them on the altar next to the picture of the Weeping Virgin. He opened the lid and the white steam rushed upward, mingling with the swirling fog,

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[3]Norman Wirzba, 2003, *The paradise of God: Renewing religion in an ecological age,* New York: Oxford University Press, 55-56.

[4]On this, see Wirzba, *The paradise of God,* 57-58.

and steamed the glass on the front of the picture until the Virgin gradually disappeared from sight.

His manner was almost childlike as he sat waiting. He was completely still with his wrinkled hands crossed gently on his lap. His face combined both the ravage and beauty of a long and difficult life. It was the face of a child, filled with unbounded joy and wonder, and it was the face of the aged, creased with emotion and a sense of the closeness with the end. His warm visage seemed to ask of life, "What is the answer?" While his child face smiled and replied, "What was the question?"

It was evening, before don Chalo sensed a sudden but subtle change in the day that until now remained so constant. It might have been a slight pause in the cold wind that had blown all day, or a small gap in the damp fog that allowed a momentary ray of warm sunlight to touch his house. He was sure of only one thing–his long silent vigil for his wife had finally ended. His head turned toward the open door to greet her, his blind eyes filled with tears. And like the new light of the rising sun spreading over a mountain meadow, unrestrained joy swept over his face. He said nothing, greeting her with silent memories alone.

. . . Don Chalo sat with his wrinkled face turned toward the open door; the clouds filled the room, the tamales steamed; the rain dripped onto the dirt floor; the bell tolled distantly; and the wind softly nudged the path of flowery gold among the rocks.[5]

I would only add here that the golden path is one of marigolds that in some villages are said to lead the dead back home. In our encounter with those who have died – sharing a meal no less – we are surely thrown back to the need to frame our questions about life so that at least the pathway to an answer might be in the offing. Out of the heart of our tradition is this prophetic vision of a new heaven and earth – or a world where the divine presence presents a radical alternative to the way things are in what for too many remains a veil of tears and injustice. Or is it simply a vision of a world where "troubles don't last always"?

Preaching in November, then, has to do with a summing up; it is about a homecoming to a new earth where God's presence, indeed God's home, is now in the midst of human history. Being unbound in the face of death frees us to engage death in a different, sometimes even joyful way; but it also means that beyond all tears this homecoming both at this altar and around this table empowers us to testify to the grace

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[5]Gregory C. Reck, 1986[1978], *In the shadow of Tlaloc: Life in a Mexican village,* reissue, Prospect Heights, Illinois: Waveland Press, 98-99.

that comes to those who thirst as “a gift from the spring of the water of life.” This living water brings with it the hope of reconciliation and restoration with all those who have gone before and who will come in the future. But most especially it is water offered to the thirsty who are with us now – sisters and brothers created in the very image of this God with us. **AMEN.**