

Rev. Beth Dickerson  
Lake Street Church

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“Still with Us”

Hebrews 12:1,12-15 and Wisdom of Solomon 3: 1-3

This day on the church calendar grows all the more precious to me the older I get, as the number of those dear to me grows more robust with each passing year. I grew up in the Presbyterian Church referring to this Sunday as “All Saints Sunday”. However, it’s been suggested that referring to this Sunday as All Saints Sunday is a no-no here at Lake Street Church. Apparently, it’s reminiscent of the Catholic Church. So we’re calling this Sunday the “Day of the Dead” in honor of the custom of the Latinx people in this church, our Niños partnership, and Latinx people from around the globe.

For all of those for whom I light a candle and remember on this Sunday, there is one I carry closest to my heart. This person is my grandma. She is the one whose death has me yearning most deeply for the promises of this day. There is always, one at least, if we are so fortunate, who we carry so close that even decades later nothing makes us more grateful than the gift of the thought that they are peaceful, safe, and well.

I want to share with you a visionary reading from the Book of Revelation, the apocalyptic text that is the final book of the New Testament. You may remember that a few months ago I preached from Revelation, this strange book of the Bible that was written by John of Patmos. John of Patmos is not the same John who wrote the Gospel of John. John of Patmos was a charismatic Christian zealot who was sent, by the Romans, to the isolated island of Patmos as punishment. He claimed that the Book of Revelation was sent to him by God as a vision. The entire Book of Revelation is a little hard to swallow but I’m going to read from it anyway. The following is Revelation 7 verses 13 -17. “Then one of the elders

addressed me saying, ‘Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?’ I said to him, ‘Sir, you are the one that knows.’ Then he said to me, ‘These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; for this reason they are before the throne of God. The one on the throne will shelter them. They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and they will be guided to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.’” It all sounds pretty fantastic. Our scientific, sensible minds want to reject the notion that maybe such a place exists in the afterlife.

But for the last couple of weeks I’ve been reading that such a place might be surprisingly real. I’ve been reading the book “Life after Life” which was published in 1975 by medical doctor Raymond A. Moody Jr.. In this milestone work, Dr. Moody focused his keen philosophical and scientific mind on the strange experiences reported to him by over a hundred patients who returned from the brink of death to tell their tale. The similarities in their experiences struck him. Despite the wide variety of patients’ belief systems, medical situations, and cultural backgrounds, their recollections shared some common features that convinced him the subject of life after death was worthy of scientific scrutiny.

These common features of these near-death experiences seem to mirror what is written in the Book of Revelation. Dr. Moody points out in his research that many of those with NDEs were not Christian yet all their experiences were remarkably the same. Dr. Moody’s book is more nuanced than I’m going to make it sound but the following is a list of what these hundred people reported. The following are what people commonly experienced:

- Peace and quiet. All pain is gone. “All I felt was warmth and the most extreme comfort I have ever felt.”
- Noise. Loud ringing or buzzing

- The Dark Tunnel. A sensation of being pulled rapidly through space.
- An out of body experience looking down on themselves as they were being resuscitated.
- Becoming a being in a spiritual form. Weightless. Could not be seen or heard. People walked right through them. Still in a body but not a physical body. The body is whole even if there was physical damage to the body on earth. Thinking clearly. Communicating with other spiritual beings but not in words.
- Meeting others who have gone before.
- The Being of Light. Encounter with a very bright light – unearthly brilliance. Everyone said it was a being of light with a definite personality. The love and warmth which emanate from this being are beyond words.
- A review of their lives.
- Difficulty in telling others what they had experienced.

As I said earlier, one of the reasons I enjoy this particular Sunday of the liturgical year is it's an opportunity to remember my grandmother. My grandmother passed away in 1993 at the age of 91. She was one of a kind, like all the people we honor today. Cook extraordinaire. Bridge player. Keeper of family history. Keeper of family calmness. Possessed of a cheerfulness which stayed with her to the end of her life. The only time I ever saw her mad was one time when she was putting together a bowl of fruit and she couldn't get the banana to do what she wanted it to do and she threw the banana across the kitchen. My younger sister and I were so startled that we were speechless. I wish you all had known my grandmother just as I wish I had known those we honor today, because

what God says through Solomon is true: No one like them has ever been born before and no one like them will ever rise again.

To praise God in times of joy is easy. To praise God in times of sorrow is much harder. At the end of this morning's worship we will hear in the Call to Commitment the words of the Kaddish, a prayer synonymous with Jewish mourning. I find it interesting that this prayer, intended for mourners, does not mention death or consolation. It does not speak of loss, sadness, or bereavement. The literal meaning of Kaddish is "holy" and the prayer is a doxology listing God's holy attributes: Blessed, praised, honored, extolled, glorified, adored and exalted.

These can be hard words for mourners. Yet for centuries Jewish tradition has placed this prayer in the mouths of people who are in no mood for praise. Its purpose is to turn our thoughts from death and loss in order to focus on the attributes of God.

Judaism is a faith that embraces all of life, and death is a part of life. This ancient faith, part of our own theology, leads us through moments of joy and guides us through terrible moments of grief, holding us firm through the complex emotions of mourning and bidding us to turn our gaze from the night of darkness to the dawn of life. The Kaddish intends that mourners turn away from death and choose life. It intends that we take notice of our surroundings - the love of God that guides and preserves our innermost being in this life and the next.

Common to both the Jewish and Christian faiths is the injunction to remember as a means of accessing the spiritual power and joy with which God surrounds us. We remember persons of faith. We gather today to remember and to honor and to give thanks and to be encouraged by the example of those who have gone on to the next phase of life. In the eyes of this community and God, they are not forgotten and they will not be forgotten! Their memory surrounds us and inspires us to

surround one another with the care and compassion that God intends for human communities. The 12<sup>th</sup> Chapter of the Letter to the Hebrews was written to a church with faith fatigue. The author wanted them to remember past people of faith to energize them for struggles that lay ahead. “Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, then let us lay aside every weight that clings so closely and run with perseverance the race that is set before us.” Now I don’t believe Lake Street Church has faith fatigue, but I still think this is a wonderful biblical quote for Lake Street Church this very day.

As I remember my Grandma it’s as if God is saying to me and to all of you who have lost a loved one, “No one like her has ever been before. And no one like him will ever be again. Value her. Embrace him. Honor their memory by living by the best example they set during their earthly days.”

I do not yet know, of course, but I believe this; that the day has come when those we have loved are gathered close to the heart of God. And that even now, whether we commended them into God’s eternal care two days ago or twenty years ago, God’s hand is already there wiping away the signs of their suffering with the promise of life abundant and full.

In a similar way, one day, when you and I have joined that great cloud of witnesses, the chasms which were left by all of our losses will not only be forgotten, but they will be filled once more by our God who would and will and does bend down to wipe away our tears, even now.

And so it is that this day becomes more precious to me each year. Not only because the ‘host’ of those I have loved keeps expanding, but because the promise of what will one day be becomes all the more anticipated as well.

With many of you, I have lighted the candles this Day of the Dead, in memory and in powerful hope I will light them again, year after year, standing confident in the promises of God.

May it be so. Blessed Be.

Mourning Prayer of Kaddish

*May the great Name of God be exalted and sanctified, throughout the world, which God has created according to God's will. May God's Kingdom be established in your lifetime and in your days, and in the lifetime of the entire household of Israel, swiftly and in the near future.*

*May God's great name be blessed, forever and ever.*

*Blessed, praised, glorified, exalted, extolled, honored elevated and lauded be the Name of the holy one, Blessed is God- above and beyond any blessings and hymns, Praises and consolations which are uttered in the world.*

*May there be abundant peace from Heaven, and life, upon us and upon all the world. Amen.*