

Throughout this pandemic, I feel as though we have been living what one theologian calls “the Saturdays of our lives.” The *Saturdays of our lives* represent those despairing places in life between the crucifixion of Good Friday and the resurrection of Sunday morning. They represent the stench of death we have experienced and felt throughout this pandemic. They represent the emptiness and longing we may feel in the wilderness of despair. They represent those places in life where what is crystal clear is the suffering and the pain and the agony and the chaos, and where the resurrection of Sunday and the promise of new life seem like a fantasy or fairytale that is certainly nowhere in sight. Living in the Saturdays of our lives is a difficult place to live. And, that place of death and despair is **the** context for all our readings on this day, readings that are truly **life-giving**.

It is important to note that, when the Bible speaks of death, it does so in terms of the future. Using poetic writings and visions, the Bible speaks words of hope and promise, and words of a future that is before us but not yet here. They are words we **need** to hear in the Saturdays of our lives. In our first reading, Isaiah was speaking to displaced people in the 8th century BCE. The Assyrians had swept in and captured the Israelites and forced them to scatter throughout the empire. It was, in essence, yet another

wilderness experience and the people were asking THE big despairing question, “Where is God?” Many had lost their faith and it was **there**, in the anguish, that God came to the people of Israel. God met them **right where they were**, made God’s presence known to them through the prophet Isaiah, and gave them desperately needed words of hope. God gave them words of hope and promise that ring down through the centuries to provide the words **we** so desperately need to hear in the Saturdays of our lives.

Isaiah speaks to the people of Israel and to us, and he beautifully describes a future day when God will throw a massive, gigantic party, when the “Lord of hosts will make for **all** peoples a feast of rich food.” God will destroy “the **shroud** that is cast over **all** peoples, the sheet that is spread over **all** nations.” With poetic words that describe the most hope-filled future, we hear that God will swallow up death **forever**, wipe away the tears from **all** faces, and God will take away the disgrace of God’s people, wiping it away from all the earth! Oh, these are hope-filled words we so desperately need to hear in the Saturdays of our lives.

In our reading from the Book of Revelation, speaking words to despairing people facing persecution, we are gifted with another vision of the future as the writer describes a whole **new** heaven and new earth. And, what is so interesting about this vision is that it is about the future of

everything, the future of **ALL things**. It is about an amazing future that God is creating where the chaos, pain and destruction of this present time will be no more! Oh, we need to hear the promise of this future as we experience our present challenges and the Saturdays of our lives!

But, wait. There is yet another story of hope and promise! On this day, we are also told of the raising of Lazarus when the very **shroud** of Lazarus is cast off. Oh, we need to hear these words because the stench of death and the roiling chaos have been swirling all around us for too long.

Lazarus, Jesus' close friend, has died. Mary and Martha knew their brother, Lazarus, would not have died had Jesus been present. **They** are living and experiencing the Saturdays of their lives. And, like us, we discover Mary using the "if only" phrase as she kneels at Jesus feet saying, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Then, as Jesus responds to Mary's weeping, we are confronted with the harsh but ultimately comforting truth of the situation. In this moment of darkness, this moment that renders God's very Word **silent**, we find that **Jesus himself weeps**. It is in **this** moment that we discover the incarnate God who weeps **with** us as Jesus reveals the passion and love of a powerless yet seemingly almighty God. When Jesus experienced Mary and Martha weeping for their dead brother Lazarus, he was "deeply moved in spirit and

troubled." As we look at this piece of the story, theologian N.T. Wright is insistent as he says:

When we look at Jesus, not least when we look at Jesus in tears, we are seeing not just a flesh-and-blood human being, but the Word made flesh. The Word, through whom the worlds were made, weeps like a baby at the grave of his friend. Only when we stop and ponder **this** will we understand the full mystery of John's gospel. Only when we put away our high-and-dry pictures of who God is and replace them with pictures in which the Word who **is God** can cry with the world's crying will we discover what the word "God" really means.

The God we worship is **not** a remote and aloof "sky god" somewhere out there. No, God is a tender God who is deeply moved, even grieved, by anything and **everything** that threatens our human well-being. In this moment, we discover **Immanuel – God with us**, a God who even **weeps** with us. And, oh my, as we experience the Saturdays of our lives, we **need** to hear these words!

But, wait! The story does not end there. Jesus commands those present to take away the stone blocking the entrance to the tomb. Now, there is nothing pretty about death. Death brings decay, rotting and stench. Oils and spices applied to a dead body would have held unpleasant odors at bay for a while, but after four days the stench would have been overpowering. And, so it was with Lazarus. Martha becomes the realist as she says, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." However, Jesus responds by saying, "Take away the stone," and

with those words we cannot help but be reminded of **Jesus'** own coming resurrection. Oh, yes, we need to hear these words in the Saturdays of our lives.

When Jesus cries out with a loud voice saying, "Lazarus, come out!" he heralds a stunning **new** possibility as the stench of death meets the fragrance of the **resurrecting power** of God's Son. Jesus' shout brings **life** to Lazarus! Lazarus, the dead man, emerges from his tomb, bound from head to foot in burial wrappings. Jesus then commands that these burial wrappings, that **shroud**, the last remnants of death, be removed as he says, "Unbind him, and let him go." The shroud, that death sheet that had been spread over Lazarus' body, is removed and the stench of death is gone. Oh yes, we need to hear these words in the Saturdays of our lives.

People, Lazarus is **us**. Bound by death in our current lives, we are called to **life** by Jesus who **is** the Light and the Life of the world. And, it is from the light of Easter dawn that we **confront** the darkness of death. Jesus stands at the edge of the Saturdays of our lives, at the edge of **our** tomb, even the tomb of Covid-19 and the many tombs in which we presently exist as we shrink from being fully alive. Jesus stands shouting, "**Come out!**" He calls us to come out and walk into the light of day, pulling free of our grave clothes as we go. From the other side of Christ's

resurrection, we gain the courage, not to deny death, but to be honest about its ability to cripple us. And, crippled we have been! We gain the courage to not let the **fear** of death distort our lives, but to **walk through it** and figure out ways to integrate it **into** our lives. As we do this, we walk placing our faith in the Risen Christ who has promised us that death does **not have the last word**. And, knowing that death is not the last word, we are free to **live, truly live**. We can stare death and darkness in the face and even embrace its reality as a part of earthly living – even in our grief, and even in our pain. Oh, yes, we need to hear these words on **this** day!

Theologian, Frederick Buechner, says, “**Resurrection** means the worst thing is **never** the last thing.” Friends, we are Lazarus, and the good news is that, in Holy Baptism, we have been joined to Christ’s death and **resurrection!** We have been promised not only life eternal but also abundant life right **here** and right **now**. We are called to **live** as though the Eternal were **now** because God **is**, and because God is present to us **here** and **now**. We are called to **live** as though we belong to God, in life and in death. We can let go of **all** that holds us in the Saturdays of our lives because the future God holds out before us is **not** dominated by death. It is one of **life** and God is calling us into **life! Come forth and live!!** Oh, yes, we so desperately need to hear these words in the Saturdays of our lives!