

Advent Lutheran Church
Beyond Simple Answers
November 3, 2024

Isaiah 25:6-9 / Revelation 21:1-6a / John 11:32-44

On a good day, I like to think I'm pretty smart. I maintained a high GPA throughout all of my many graduate degrees and I strive to be a lifelong learner.

I also need to admit how little I know. Almost every day I encounter topics about which I know almost nothing. And, I'm regularly amazed how rapidly knowledge is expanding in fields people think I know well.

Not only can both be true, but both tell you something about who I am today and how I came to this stage of life.

Or think for a moment about a more universal remark attributed to the great American writer Carl Sandburg:

"There is an eagle in me that wants to soar, and there is a hippopotamus in me that wants to wallow in the mud."¹

It's so true! We humans are complicated. And we tend to focus on how wonderful or how wallowing we are at any given moment rather than welcoming the many paradoxes that make up our human condition.

When I was planning our current sermon series – A More Spacious Christianity – I had read Debie Thomas's new book with that very subtitle, but had not yet met her. I carefully curated six of her ten words – words I felt sure would connect with folks here at Advent. My list included paradox.

It felt like a word we should struggle with and one that was particularly fitting for All Saints' Sunday. Or maybe it is just a hard topic and I knew that today would be a hard day for many people.

¹ A quick Google search will yield numerous matches, yet none of these provide evidence of Sandberg himself actually making this remark.

Presbyterian Pastor Richard Hansen captured how widespread paradox really is for people who seek to follow the Way of Jesus. He explains:

We see unseen things.
We conquer by yielding.
We find rest under a yoke.
We reign by serving . . .

We are exalted when we are humble.
We become wise by being fools for Christ's sake . . .
We gain strength when we are weak . . .
We live by dying.²

Many of us are less than comfortable with death. And, all of us have felt the pain of loss when someone near and dear to us passes from this life to life eternal. At such moments the last thing we need is a long line of people issuing trite tributes.

Rather than greeting card platitudes we long for genuine companionship – for people willing to come alongside us and to mourn with us.

Perhaps for people who listened to the Gospel reading and saw that Jesus was moved to tears. The shortest verse in the Bible is also one of the most powerful: Jesus wept.

Jesus' initial response was marked not by words but by compassionate action. He came alongside Mary. He grieved and cried with her and with those who had gathered around her. It, however, was not his full or final response.

Since this is All Saints' Sunday it's the rare Sunday when you expect your pastor to talk frankly about death. Maybe you heard the Gospel reading anew as it was presented in a more dramatic manner than usual this morning. Perhaps it sunk in for you that in our lived experience dead people stay dead, but with Jesus that isn't necessarily true.

² Richard P. Hansen. "Making the Most of Biblical Paradoxes." Available at www.preachingtoday.com/books/art-and-craft-of-biblical-preaching/style/making-most-of-biblical-paradoxes.html

The Jesus who we have been taught was himself a paradox – fully human while also fully divine – wanted to teach those present that day and those gathered here this day an important lesson. Put differently, our one God who we know in three persons, the Holy Paradox, is teaching us that death isn't as final as we imagine it to be. Lazarus is simply an example.

This is a profound lesson we need to be reminded of regularly. It is one that you all are teaching me. It is a lesson I am learning in viewing images and hearing stories of the members of Advent who have died in the Lord over the last year, especially those I never met. It is a lesson we are learning together this morning as we tell the stories of the saints who shaped our lives, including those whose images have been placed on tables in the back of the sanctuary.

Today I'm preaching my 18th sermon as your interim pastor. I've preached hundreds of times elsewhere over the last 25 years. My wife, however, has preached a total of one sermon.

Susan was invited to be the preacher at Naples United Church of Christ many years ago. In that congregation, there us one Sunday each year when lay people lead every aspect of worship.

Even though it was not All Saints' Sunday and even though the United Church of Christ is not known as a denomination that focuses on saints or sainthood, she delivered a message on saints. More specifically, she reminded us that we are all saints. Sainthood is our shared destiny.

Susan is right: we are all saints.

Paradox is also present: we are all sinners.

Now, since we've considered one of the hardest topics of all, I may as well finish up with a little commentary on the passage from Revelation – the last book in the Bible and one that is typically ignored in Mainline Protestant pulpits.

Most people are familiar with the popular image of the rapture found in the Left Behind Series that involves people suddenly being raptured or transported from earth to heaven. Our reading from Revelation describes the exact opposite: heaven comes down to earth.

Over the centuries people have had a lot to say about the passages at the end of the book of Revelation, including this one. I'm reminded that one of the things we often do is to bring our own worldview to these texts without even realizing it.

Those in power in the Roman Empire or the American Empire or any Empire can scarcely imagine a world after Empire while those marginalized and abused by Empire long for its end. Historically speaking, every attempt at earthly empires or kingdoms ultimately comes to an end.

And, yet, God is forever. I'm standing before you wearing a stole bearing the Greek letters alpha and omega. These are the first and last letters in the Greek alphabet. And in the final verse of this morning's reading from Revelation, God is identified as Alpha and Omega.

This God who is both beginning and end, the one who is Creator God and Creating God, is telling us about a future that involves God dwelling with us and a future in which there is no need for God to weep alongside us because death will be no more.

Saints of Advent, siblings in Christ, we must live in the here and now. We also must live as resurrection people. Or, in theological language, we live in the already but not yet-ness of God's kingdom.

And, I'm glad to say that as I re-read Debie Thomas' chapter on paradox this week after meeting her and hearing her speak, her words struck me in a new way. Reflecting on what the journey of faith is all about and emphasizing paradox, she writes:

God is immanent, and God is transcendent.
The Bible is God's Word, and the Bible is a human document.
Creation is good, and creation is broken.
I'm a sinner, and I'm a saint.³

Today we gather as complex creations, people made in God's image who know that we are sinners and saints. We give thanks for those who have come before and look toward the coming of God's kin-dom on earth.

And, by welcoming paradox, we commit anew to live a faith beyond simple answers.

Amen.

³ Debie Thomas. *A Faith of Many Rooms: Inhabiting a More Spacious Christianity* (Broadleaf Books, 2024), p.140.