

**Amok Time**  
**John 11:32-44; Isaiah 25:6-9; Revelation 21:1-6**  
**All Saints' Day**

**Isaiah 25:6-9**

<sup>6</sup>On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear. <sup>7</sup>And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever. <sup>8</sup>Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken.

<sup>9</sup>It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.

**John 11:32-44**

<sup>32</sup>When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

<sup>33</sup>When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.

<sup>34</sup>He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see."

<sup>35</sup>Jesus began to weep.

<sup>36</sup>So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" <sup>37</sup>But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

<sup>38</sup>Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. <sup>39</sup>Jesus said, "Take away the stone."

Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." <sup>40</sup>Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?"

<sup>41</sup>So they took away the stone.

And Jesus looked upward and said, “Father, I thank you for having heard me. <sup>42</sup>I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.”

<sup>43</sup>When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!”

<sup>44</sup>The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth.

Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.”

### **Revelation 21:1-6**

21 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.

<sup>2</sup>And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. <sup>3</sup>And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; <sup>4</sup>he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.”

<sup>5</sup>And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.”

Also he said, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.”

<sup>6</sup>Then he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.”

### The Sermon

On this All Saints’ Day, I am giving thanks to God for the people who have had a huge influence on each of our lives, much of which we only come to appreciate or even realize long after they have made their impact.

I grew up in a Midwestern town that was dominated by the presence of the sprawling national headquarters of a gigantic insurance corporation. It was a town with a lot of high achievers: smart people, ambitious people, educated people.

Between that population and the surrounding farmland, worked by generations of farmers who stoically took whatever “fate” and nature gave them, one of the things that you ate, drank and breathed was the expectation that you always kept your emotions in check.

We were all supposed to be Spock from the original *Star Trek* series—and we all kind of were.

The backstory on Spock, I am sure you remember, is that he wasn’t a human from earth; he was a Vulcan from the planet Vulcan, and Vulcans had no emotion, so they had practically made a religion out of logic.

But Spock’s mom *was* a human from earth. So inside this fascinating character was a constant tension. Half of him was incapable of emotion, and the planet that he lived on made no allowances for emotion; but this other half of him was just as prone to emotions as a regular human being from earth.

That, actually, is a pretty good description of what it was like to be from Bloomington, Illinois in the latter half of the 20th century.

If you were going to have any chance of succeeding at corporate headquarters, you’d better stick with logic, and check your emotions at the door.

Everything in that town seemed to be saturated with this phenomenon. The tall steeple church where I grew up was logical. The country club was logical. The schools were logical. Sunday lunch was logical. Neighborhoods were logical. People were logical. Births, weddings, funerals were logical.

Fascinating.

This was how it remained a place that rewarded hard-working, self-reliant people: the high achievers were smart, ambitious, educated, logical people.

But of course a lot of things that come our way during the course of a lifetime don’t care how highly educated or ambitious you are.

Tragedy, loss, abandonment, alcoholism, decimation of families, alienation... Those kinds of things don’t care whether you’re smart, ambitious, or educated.

That's when the logic that is so essential to making good decisions, both in the best of times and in moments of crisis, is suddenly revealed to be not enough.

And although the culture may have expected us all to be from the planet Vulcan—all logic and no emotion—we would, all of us, eventually find that we needed something more: that logic could help us make good decisions, but some things are not about decisions we make.

Some things are going to be sad.

Some things are going to be frustrating.

Some things are going to shake us to our foundations.

John's gospel paints a picture of Jesus going to Bethany where the people who have grown up around Lazarus and his sisters Mary and Martha feel like they have a pretty good, logical understanding of how the world works.

Logic would have dictated that Jesus would go to Bethany as soon as he heard that Lazarus was sick, so that with him there, Lazarus would be spared from death—this apparently was the family's expectation. But Jesus had chosen to wait for days before going.

Then, the disciples tried to dissuade him from going at all, because the authorities in that area had just tried to have him killed. But now he chose to go.

When Martha caught up with Jesus just before he came into the village, he said, "Your brother will rise again." And she said, calling on all the logic that faith would allow, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day."

And he said, "I am the resurrection and the life."

What, in a logical world or anywhere else, does that even mean?

When Martha heard Jesus tell them to take away the stone which had sealed the tomb, she was still appealing to logic when she said, in the immortal cadence of the King James Version, "By this time, Lord, he stinketh."

And Jesus said, "Didn't I tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?"

Jesus brought and embodied the message that God moves and acts well beyond all bounds of reason that humans have called on in our quest to master the world around us.

Past the limits of what we think we understand, past the boundaries of what we can prove is possible, God is still at work.

Beyond the point where God's people could logically conclude that our situation is hopeless; that our relationships are too broken to repair; that our problems are too complicated to resolve—

Even where there is no life left to redeem, Christ is still at work.

God's voice rings out, throughout all of our ages, from the prophet Isaiah to the book of Revelation:

Didn't you hear me? I will wipe away the tears from all faces,  
Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more,  
See, I am making all things new.

Because God knows that when people die—as when dreams die, and relationships die, and hope dies, and trust dies,

it is not just a theological-philosophical problem to be worked out with a pencil and drafting paper.

I think of Jesus at Lazarus's tomb as a parent whose child has gone missing.

I know that Jesus intentionally didn't come rushing to Bethany; I understand that he knew without a doubt that God would raise Lazarus.

But the human side of Jesus had tears and anguish and pain; he had genuine friendships with vulnerable human beings like you and me, susceptible to disease and cruelty and calamity and age and stupid, dumb luck.

Of course, the way John tells it, it sounds like Jesus is always in control—always has more in common with Vulcans than humans.

He even stops for one of the most awkwardly inserted expository prayers in the whole Bible: “Father, I thank you for having heard me—I mean, *I* knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so they may believe that you sent me.”

And then, the way it is written, you can almost imagine a polite clearing of the throat: “Ahem. Lazarus? Come out.”

But when your child is missing, you don’t go, “Lazarus, come out.” Your pace quickens. Your eyes panic. In a fraction of a second you shed your public inhibitions and your desire not to cause a scene or look like you are losing your mind.

You don’t go, “Lazarus: come out.” You shout: “*Lazarus!* Come out!”

Admittedly, the idea of Jesus being more like a parent in a moment of urgency doesn’t fit easily into my awareness of his transcendence and his existential self-knowledge of who he is and what he can do.

But I can’t help but notice that about two seconds ago, he was crying over his friend.

And when he made it to the cave where Lazarus had been buried, he was—John’s words—“again greatly disturbed,” literally, “groaning within himself.”

The Bible does not give us, and does not owe us, any deeper explanation of what exactly Jesus was groaning within himself for.

Scholars trying to make excuses for Jesus’ emotional outbursts here have long suggested that it was the mourning of the people around him that, on an intellectual level of course, disturbed Jesus. I don’t know.

Maybe it was the gaping, empty hole that would be left in his own life or the lives of Lazarus’s siblings and friends and neighbors.

It could have been a sense that Lazarus had not yet had all the days and hours and moments that he should have had: the sunrises and sunsets and the feel of a cooling breeze; the sound of music, and the taste of really good food at a wedding banquet; the smell of wild flowers in the summer time... All the blessings of an earthly life that we wish for the people we love and on whose shoulders we stand.

Whatever the unarticulated cause of Jesus' disturbance, he stood outside the tomb, prayed, and said, "Lazarus, come out!"

He reached into the darkness, into the stench and the appalling silence, into the realm of heartbreaking absence, and grabbed a human soul to bring it back to the light of another day, because that's what God does.

God brings life from death.

"For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible" (Mark 10:27).

"What is impossible for mortals is possible for God" (Luke 18:27).

"Nothing will be impossible with God" (Luke 1:37).

In a 2010 book that observed the hazards to the survival of the Church, Kenda Creasy Dean wrote nevertheless, "Christianity has died many times and risen again; for it had a God who knew the way out of the grave."<sup>i</sup>

God can always make things alive, even things that are dead.

You and I are emissaries of this truth. We have been entrusted with demonstrating our belief, hope and confidence in it to a world obsessed by and terrified of death.

We are a kingdom of priests charged with testifying to and embodying God's power, authority and will to raise up what is dead to new life.

This testimony is holy communion for ourselves and for the people around us, who not only wrestle with our mortality and that of the people we love and live for, but who also die countless little deaths all the time.

They may be mourning loved ones no longer here to share their lives;  
they may be mourning their lost idealism,  
their sense of belonging to a community,  
the vigor of their minds and hearts and bodies,  
or the sense that they live in a world that they know and understand.

If you have the tremendous good fortune of being in a position to go for a walk just before dawn in this beautiful part of the world at this breathtaking time of year, before the sun comes up over the ridge, everything looks beautiful—brown, red, orange and green overhead.

On the ground, dry leaves bring back a nostalgic sound in your head of kids kicking through autumn leaves.

The world you are admiring is beautiful, but like the dry bones re-covered with sinews and flesh in Ezekiel's vision, the colors don't indicate life. It's the fall of the year, and the term we use for those leaves is they are dying, or they're dead.

But then the sun seems not just to peek gently over the ridge, but to barge into the room; and all of a sudden, it looks like somebody plugged in the electricity; they glow, and they seem to have come alive, to be harmonious and existing to sing God's praises.

And you remember that a leaf, whether budding in springtime or changing color in the fall, is not a living organism by itself. It's a piece of something larger, something greater, more complex—something that is a living organism.

Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote:

The sun and the stars shining glorify God. They stand where God placed them, they move where God bid them.

“The heavens declare the glory of God”—They glorify God, *but they do not know it.*

The birds sing to God,  
the thunder speaks of God's terror,  
the lion is like God's strength,  
the sea is like God's greatness,  
the honey like God's sweetness;

they are something like God,  
they make God known,  
they tell of God,  
they give God glory,

but they do not know they do,  
they do not know God, they never can,  
they are brute things that only think of food or think of nothing.

This then is poor praise, faint reverence, slight service, dull glory.  
Nevertheless what they can *they always do*.<sup>ii</sup>

You and I are animate. You and I—like, later, the bones in Ezekiel’s vision—have had God’s spirit breathed into us.

You and I are capable of doing better than inanimate objects that already do a pretty good job of praising God. You and I have the ability to do more than inanimate objects.

Even if something in you that is beautiful, or true, has died, that is not too much for God to overcome.

“Lazarus, come out.” And see that the home of God is among mortals. And their loving, eternal God will wipe every tear from their eyes.

And just maybe, when we arrive at that great banquet table where the saints who have gone before us are already gathered, and God wipes the tears from your eyes, maybe we will find that there may have been some tears in God’s eyes, too.

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<sup>i</sup> Kenda Dean, *Almost Christian*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.

<sup>ii</sup> Gerard Manley Hopkins, *The Principle or Foundation*.