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Sermon – John 11:32-44  
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May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

This past Friday, on the feast of All Souls, I was at the Resurrect Learning Party in Victoria. That night we had Eucharist at Christ Church Cathedral – have any of you been there? From the outside it is a massive stone building; in the inside it is a grand, holy space. I stood in front of the chancel in awe – the energy of the place spoke to me of 90 years of worship and prayer, 90 years of people pouring out their lives in service of Christ in that place, 90 years of people knowing God is present there. The place speaks of a history. I thought we were gathering to worship in the sanctuary, but we were directed to the back, down the stairs, through a hallway, into a narrow room lined with plaques. At first I wondered if we were just too small a group for worshipping upstairs, but then I realized we were in the crypt, literally surrounded by the great cloud of witnesses from the cathedral community. Throughout the candle-lit Eucharist I wondered about their lives, their families, their faith. Who were the Marys and Marthas? Who do people remember as saints? Our chairs faced each other along the sides of the very narrow room, with the altar at one end and the pulpit on the other. I was roughly in the middle, in front of a table with rows of votive candles we were invited to light in memory of those who have passed on. When everyone had lit their candle, the table glowed in front of me, and all I could think was, they matter. Those who lived matter deeply to us. Their memory glows in the darkness.

We are still deeply connected to them, not only in memory, but they shaped the world in which we live – without their contributions to our communities and the world, our lives wouldn't be what they are. What came before us matters profoundly. Some of our losses are still fresh and others come right back as if they were yesterday. I think of the people of Pittsburgh and Tree of Life Synagogue community whose loss comes with an act of violence, as if losing someone isn't enough . . . and the violence happens

over and over again. I listened to a short interview with someone from the neighbourhood who said this of one of the victims: “he was always present in the community; he was at my bar mitzvah and now he’s just gone.” Where is God? Can God not do something? I feel like Job . . . where are you, God, why are you not working within this problem? We need you desperately.

When Lazarus passes on from this world, the community gathers. They feel the hole his death leaves in their midst, and surround Mary and Martha who in the end watch helplessly from Lazarus’ bedside, having done everything in their power to make him well. They send for Jesus, cry out for Jesus, but days pass and he does not come. They are confused and frustrated: if he were here, he would have been able to save Lazarus; if Jesus were here, surely he would not have died. They wonder desperately, Jesus, where are you?

I wonder if Jesus heard the family of Lazarus crying out in their grief. I wonder if their prayer to God intersected with Jesus’ own prayer, asking God to work in Lazarus. From the moment Jesus heard Lazarus was sick, he knew Lazarus would be raised. Jesus does not show up at the tomb and subsequently pray to God, asking God to act. No, Jesus begins this conversation with God as soon as he hears of Lazarus’ illness. Jesus says at the tomb, “Father, I thank you for having heard me. 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.” Did you notice he speaks in past tense? Martha and Mary are surrounded by their community, but they feel abandoned by Jesus. There are no cell phones or email, so they don’t know how Jesus is preparing for this moment. They don’t know how Jesus speaks intimately with God to not only raise their brother from death, but show the community that not only is Lazarus not dead, the living God is present and active in their midst. Through the power of God’s love, Jesus breaks open for people their understanding of life and death . . . which will only become more acute with Jesus’ own death and resurrection. Death is not the end of the story. Death is never the end of the story.

Jesus makes a choice to go back to Judea; the Jews are all wound up and ready to pounce on him, but he makes a conscious choice to go back for the sake of his friend. Even though Jesus knew God was working in Lazarus, preparing him to be raised, when Jesus enters Lazarus' community, he is deeply effected by the grief of the people there. Jesus resonates with their grief and bursts into tears. We could make sense of it by saying Jesus is fully human and has human feelings, but there is an even more profound truth expressed here. Jesus is the word of God manifest in the world; Jesus' actions are God's spoken word. God grieves with Mary and Martha; God grieves with their community. God is ready to raise Lazarus, and yet the grief is real; God is with them and allows their grief to penetrate God's heart.

I imagine the scene as Jesus calls for Lazarus to come out. Jesus stands before the tomb; Martha and Mary behind him, held on either side by friends, the rest of the community gathered in a semi-circle behind and around them. God is at the center of the action and at the center of the miracle. All the gathered are witnesses to God's work in their midst. They step into that holy role of witnessing. On this day of honouring those who have gone before us, I wonder about the gathering of that great cloud of witnesses present with them, encircling the community, supporting them, celebrating the power of God to reach into their lives in such a powerful way.

I wonder a lot of things about the great cloud of witnesses. I wonder about Saints and ancestors. I wonder if they're in heaven and surrounding us simultaneously. I wonder what consciousness looks like for them. I wonder what Lazarus experienced during those 4 days. I wonder a lot of things, but I believe they are real. Sometimes in prayer, I all of a sudden feel surrounded by a community of love. I see them in grain patterns in wood panelling and in objects around the room. Sometimes I see them in my imagination much like the image on the front of the bulletin, all gathered and standing shoulder to shoulder, like a tightly knit shawl, surrounding me. They feel like my family, my grandparents, great

grandparents, great aunts and uncles, distant cousins no one has spoken of for generations, and yet they are my family. They go back to Poland, Ireland, Switzerland, the Cherokee and Shawnee and more. Sometimes I just sit there and feel their presence, feeling the comfort, encouragement and assurance they offer, reminding me I am not alone. When I'm having a hard day, or I'm feeling sad or I'm too busy to sit down to pray, it is particularly comforting to know that I am not alone. I was surprised the first time it happened – I thought, they're for me. They're here on purpose; that is extraordinary. How long have they been here? Did they just arrive or am I just becoming aware of them?

I don't understand it, but I believe it's true that they are present with us and active in our lives, just as God is active in our lives. Thanks be to our God who resonates with our pain, our grief and brokenness, and brings new life in the center of our lives. We are not alone. Thanks be to God for the lives of the saints to move us and inspire our faith, and for the lives of all who have gone before us. We are not alone. Thanks be to God for our living human community that cares for each other in intentional and meaningful ways. We are not alone; thanks be to God. Amen.