

Proper 26 (31) - All Saints Day November 3, 2024

Isaiah 25:1, 4a, 6–10a; Psalm 67; Romans 15:7–13; Matthew 27:50–56

“When the veil is torn”

1. This morning we hear again about the Temple in Jerusalem, and specifically about a very special curtain inside the temple
 - a. A few weeks ago I spoke to you about the temple in Jerusalem, the center of the worship life and identity of Jewish people for a thousand years prior to the time of Jesus
 - b. The temple was where sacrifices took place on behalf of the people throughout the year, and only once a year, on the day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), the High Priest could enter the most sacred part of the temple, the Holy of Holies., where tradition affirmed was the seat of God’s very presence. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/high-priest>
 - c. The Holy of Holies used to hold the Ark of the Covenant, thought that had been stolen by a foreign army in a previous invasion.
 - i. Nonetheless, that now empty area, the Holy of Holies, was still where God’s presence was understood to be, and that room was separated from the rest the temple by a large, thick curtain or veil.
 - ii. Think of the veil as protecting the people from the power of God’s glory – kind of like the veil Moses was made to wear because of how his faced shined after he would come face to face with God up on Mount Sinai.
 - d. In our story, as Jesus died on the cross in an area just outside Jerusalem’s walls, inside the city walls, in the heart of the city, the gospel reports that the curtain or veil leading to the Holy of Holies in the temple was torn from top to bottom
 - i. What a dramatic detail to include here!
 - ii. One age-old interpretation of that detail is that now there would no longer be separation between humans and God – we could have access to God!
 - iii. Another interpretation would see it as a sign of God’s grief (tearing one’s clothes was a sign of mourning)
 - iv. With either of those interpretations, one feels a shift of intimate connection then between God and humans, an emotional closeness
 - e. But that’s not the only shocking detail shared in that moment of Jesus’ death
 - i. There are some dead people who had been in graves who are raised, and when Jesus himself is raised, they leave their tombs and appear to many
 - ii. This is a detail only shared in this gospel’s retelling of the story
 - iii. It’s something that is hard to wrap one’s head around, but it feels like a poetic parallel to the tearing of the temple veil
 - iv. It’s as though there has been a cosmic tear in the fabric of reality, like there is now a passageway open between where God is and where we are, where our life happens and the great beyond.
2. As articulated in Celtic spirituality, they seem to be in the presence of a thin place
 - a. I’ve mentioned before that the Celts (in Ireland and Scotland) have felt that there are places which, because of their beauty or their spiritual uniqueness, are somehow very close to what is holy

- b. They talk of them as thin places, where the veil between heaven and earth is thin
 - c. Usually this designation is for special physical places, but one can also understand it as an internal spiritual moment when our awareness makes God's presence feel so clear and near.
 - d. Those who stood by witnessing Jesus' dramatic death, who felt the earthquake, who saw the splitting of rocks and later heard of the tearing of the temple veil, they find themselves deeply impacted.
 - e. The centurion keeping order at the crucifixion offers a declaration of faith which almost comes from beyond him, speaking of Jesus: surely this was God's son
3. All Saints Sunday is a kind of thin place, when we emotionally approach the thin veil between heaven and earth remembering our loved ones.
- a. Though it is a day like any other, setting it apart to think about our loved ones makes us realize that we walk in close proximity to heaven every day, surrounded by this great cloud of witnesses
 - b. We are reminded of the faithfulness of loved ones we miss dearly
 - c. And in remembering, it's like we still hear their words of wisdom echo in our ears, and their embrace of comfort still feels warm.
 - d. It is not just a sentimental walk down memory lane, but instead it is a moment of gratitude for how Jesus was present in their lives, in their actions.
 - e. It is a reminder that such presence was evident when they were among us, and can still be here in our memory even though they're gone
 - f. We know our loved ones were not perfect, but we acknowledge to ourselves that their lives actually revealed thin places where heaven and earth were so close
 - g. We move about in thin places. Spiritually God is as close to us as our next breath, heaven so close to us we can almost touch it.
 - h. That stands in contrast to the anxiety of a world full of fear, to the despair of a world at war.
 - i. That anxiety and despair felt real at the time of Jesus and today, which is why the gospel shines the spotlight on the disruptive moment of the veil torn and the graves opened.
 - j. Because no matter what might be happening around us, with threats, concerns, and uncertainty, we are reminded that God isn't distant, but is always near, and so is the wisdom and courage which our ancestors left us as an example.
4. In a couple of days, a national election will put on full display how divided our country has come to be.
- a. We carry in our bodies the tension building up, and we brace for how the country will react.
 - b. We carry in our hearts the worry for a local community where relatives and neighbors focus more on what distances us than on what unites us.
 - c. But our passage allows us to go into this week
 - i. reminded of how close God is to us,
 - ii. reminded that the courage and love that Jesus showed putting his life on the line is a disruptive force for good
 - iii. and reminded of the lessons of faithfulness we learned from ancestors.