

Malcolm Clemens Young
Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA Z39
All Saints Day (Year B) 11:00 a.m. Baptism
Sunday 3 November 2019 Using Year B Readings!

Isaiah 25:6-9
Psalm 66:1-11
Revelations 21:1-6
John 11:32-44

Reality Beyond this Dream

"See I am making all things new" (Revelation 21).

As we dream we usually have some awareness of the real world around us. Sometimes that reality even enters into our dream. But while we sleep, the dream is the only way for us to interpret what our senses communicate. So the windchimes around the corner become instead tolling bells in a distant tower. We smell Sonoma County wildfires but in the dream the smoke comes from an immense cauldron of fire. The swoosh of the street cleaning truck becomes a driving rain sweeping through a grassy valley. And the person we love, trying to wake us, at first seems to be only the voice of a distant stranger.¹

In the dream we cannot perceive these things as they are. "For while those who have awakened know what it is to sleep, those who are asleep do not remember what it is to be awake."² This morning I am proposing that this may be our situation too. We all may be to some extent or another asleep. There may be different levels of wakefulness that we are not even aware of most of the time.

Often when I ask someone these days how they are doing, they reply and I can't help but think, "Is that the way things really are or is that just something you read on the internet?" Is what happens on the internet really real? I say this in a room full of people who recently have been more awake than almost anyone else, our new parents.

My children came into the world in the same hospital where my brother and I were born. At that moment I felt an oceanic sense of vulnerability and responsibility. But I also felt the most intense feeling of gratefulness and joy. I remember sitting in our apartment with the soft late afternoon sun shining on us and looking into my son's eyes and spontaneously whispering, "What is God like? Tell me before you forget."

I felt this same kind of wakefulness during the AIDS crisis when I served a small urban church in Boston Massachusetts. It felt like we had a funeral every other week. Everything seemed horrifyingly backwards. Old people seemed like they were going to live forever. And young, beautiful, loving, talented people were dying agonizing deaths shunned by the very families that should have loved them most. Every day shattered our illusions - the illusions that we would live forever, that our relations to each other are casual or superficial, that we do not at the deepest level desperately need each other.

With the music, the smell of baked bread and incense, these vast arches and light

filtered through thousands of shards of stained glass, almost everyone who arrives at Grace Cathedral steps into a deeper reality. A longing for this more awakened state of being in some way or other brought all of us here today.

The two most famous New Testament sisters are Martha and Mary. At every point they approach Jesus in a different way. Martha works hard, she concentrates on practical matters. She is always thinking about how everyone will get fed, how the work will get done, but she is also judgmental. She resents her sister for just sitting and listening to Jesus. And she confronts Jesus about this. At this point Jesus frustrates many of us and tells Martha she needs to be more like her sister (Lk. 10).

Mary on the other hand is so obviously drawn by deep love. She just wants to be with Jesus, to really pay attention. She has such faith that when her brother dies, she kneels at Jesus' feet and says, "Lord if you had been here, my brother would not have died." When Jesus sees her crying and recognizes the depth of her love he breaks down and weeps (Jn. 11). All of us are both Martha and Mary. We are practically going about the business of the world in the way Martha is, but we also have intimations of a deeper reality like Mary.

Through baptism on All Saint's Day we become part of the Body of Christ stretching back to the beginning and out to the end. Through baptism we make a commitment to living more completely in the deeper reality of God. Baptism is a like note that reminds us that we are part of something essential and eternal. It is like a thread that takes us back through the maze into the presence of the holy.

Our cathedral theme is "the Year of the Body" and I want to talk briefly about the way our bodies have a role in helping us to be more awake, to live in a deeper, truer reality. Baptism is one part of how we teach our children to honor and reverence their bodies.

Christianity came into existence during a time when people's bodies could be bought and sold, when it was a matter of sport to watch Christians torn apart by animals in the Coliseum, when the father in a family could legally kill anyone in his household. Back then philosophers talked about the body as a kind of prison for the soul. In contrast to that world Christians believed that bodies are not just vulnerable, but also indispensable and holy. They believed that God comes to us in a real person with a real body. They believed in the resurrection of the body.

Paul writes, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28). Being a follower of Jesus is the heart of our identity. It matters more than our gender, class, ethnicity, status, where we come from or who we think our people are. Our bodies are part of what make us equal.

As parents we communicate our values about the body through “table life.” What happens at your dining table will have a greater effect on your children’s life than almost anything else. At the table they will enjoy the gift of good food, and be in a place where everyone’s voice is of equal importance. At the table children learn that they do not just belong to the family but have responsibility to the wider world. It should be a place that can welcome unexpected guests.

At the table children will learn that joy is a skill that depends to a great extent on where we put our attention. Psychologists point out three factors that have the greatest influence on happiness. First, the ability to reframe situations more positively, second, our ability to experience gratitude, and finally our decision to be kind and generous to others.³ Saying a prayer before meals may be one of the simplest things you can do to help your children lead a life of joy. The German mystic Meister Eckhart (1260-1328) says, “if the only prayer you ever say in your entire life is thank you, it is sufficient.”⁴

The twentieth century French intellectual Simone Weil (1909-1943) writes that only those who have known joy and been open to suffering can, “hear the universe as the vibration of the word of God.”⁵ Hearing this will change everything for you.

I want to conclude with a poem and a story that point the way to what it feels like to be awakened to what is real and to God. Mark Doty wrote poems about the illness and death of his partner Wally Roberts from AIDS. This poem is called “Michael’s Dream.”

“Michael writes to tell me his dream: / *I was helping Randy out of bed, / supporting him on one side / with another friend on the other, // and as we stood him up, he stepped out / of the body I was holding and became / a shining body, brilliant light / held in the form I first knew him in. // This is what I imagine will happen, / the spirit’s release.* Michael, / when we support our friends, / one of us on either side, our arms // under the man or woman’s arms, / what is it we’re holding? Vessel, / shadow, hurrying light? All those years / I made love to a man without thinking /

“how little his body had to do with me; / now diminished, he’s never been so plainly himself – remote and unguarded, / an otherness I can’t know / the first thing about... // In the dream Randy’s leaping into the future, and still here; Michael’s holding him / and releasing at once. Just as Steve’s / holding Jerry, though he’s already gone, / Marie holding John, gone, Maggie holding / her John, gone... and I’m holding Wally, who’s going. / *Where isn’t the question, / though we think it is; / we don’t even know where the living are, //*

“in this raddled and unraveling “here.” / What is the body? Rain on a window, / a clear movement over whose gaze? / Husk, leaf, little boat of paper / and wood to mark the speed of the stream? / Randy and Jerry, Michael and Wally / and John: lucky we don’t have to know / what something is in order to hold it.”

Although in clearer moments we see the reality that our body is a gift from God we are ambivalent about our body. Sometimes we feel like we have a body. Other times it seems like we are a body. But at all times this body allows us to reach out and help each other.⁶

Rabbi David Wolpe tells a story about his grandfather's early death and his father's loneliness as he tried to come to terms with it as an only child at the age of eleven. It was the practice for a son to walk to the synagogue early every morning for a year after the death for prayers and the boy did this. After the first week he noticed Mr. Einstein, the synagogue's ritual director, walking past his home every day just as he was leaving.

Mr. Einstein was getting old and he said, "Your home is on the way to the synagogue and I thought it might be fun to have some company." And for a year through the New England seasons they walked and talked about life and the boy was not so alone.

Wolpe's dad grew up, married and when his oldest son was born he called Mr. Einstein to ask if he'd like to meet his new family. Mr. Einstein agreed but since he was in his nineties he invited the family to come see him."

Wolpe's father writes about that visit. "The journey was long and complicated. His home, by car, was fully twenty minutes away. I drove in tears as I realized what he had done. He had walked an hour to my home so that I would not have to be alone each morning... By the simplest of gestures, the act of caring, he took a frightened child and he led him with confidence and with faith back into life."⁷

All the readings today are about death and the hidden truth that God is making all things new. The deepest reality that we are awakening to is that God loves you so very much. Like Mr. Einstein, God is walking with you every day.

We sleep in the illusion that we are separated from each other, from the people who have gone before us and from God. You who have held a child, you who have cared for someone who is dying, you who experience the beauty of this cathedral – remember what it is like to be awake!

¹ David Bentley Hart, *The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013) 11-12.

² *Ibid.*, 292.

³ Citing research from Sonja Lyubomirsky. Dalai Lama, Desmond Tutu and Douglas Abrams, *The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World* (NY :Avery, 2016), 48-9

⁴ David J. Wolpe, *Why Faith Matters* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2008) 1.

⁵ Stephanie Paulsell, *Honoring the Body: Meditations on a Christian Practice* (San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, 2003) 174-5.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 19-21.

⁷ David J. Wolpe, *Why Faith Matters* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2008) 96-7.