Malcolm Clemens Young Wisdom 3:1-9

Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA 2B34 Psalm 24

All Saints Day (Year B) 8:30 a.m. Eucharist and 11:00 a.m. Baptisms Revelation 21:1-6a

Sunday 7 November 2021 End of Daylight Savings Time John 11:32-44

**An Absolutely Ordinary Rainbow**

“Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God” (Jn. 11)?

One of my most vivid Pandemic memories Pandemic involved shopping for survival supplies at Smart and Final in the Outer Richmond. Raise your hand if you remember doing something like this. At that point we didn’t feel confident that grocery stores would remain open or that there would be enough food. Do you remember those lists of disaster supplies on the Internet (tarps, water storage containers, tools for turning off the gas, etc.). One included a shovel for burying bodies in the backyard.[[1]](#endnote-1)

We heard the constant ambulance sirens in New York City and about refrigerator trucks filled with corpses. Indeed family members and friends were dying. Do you remember we also went through a period when it seemed like a third of all workers would lose their jobs. Then there were the days after the rioting when downtown San Francisco looked like a war zone. Then the wildfire darkness descended on us.

Because we are trying so hard just to keep going and to help the people who depend on us, we forget just how traumatic our experience of COVID was. But now we are beginning to come out of our caves. Something in us had died. And now we are wondering if we might be able to really live again. My sermon comes in three parts: 1. Believing and Seeing, 2. Feeling and Showing, 3. Acting and Being Helped.

1. Believing and Seeing. After the authorities tried twice to arrest Jesus and twice to have him stoned to death, Jesus and his friends leave Judea and cross the Jordan River.[[2]](#endnote-2) Jesus hearing that his friend Lazarus is sick decides to go back into danger to see him. By the time Jesus arrives Lazarus has died. Seeing the sorrow of everyone but especially Lazarus’ sisters Martha and Mary, Jesus weeps. Everyone can see his love.

The context of this story is really important. In the other gospels Jesus teaches through parables that use ordinary examples to illustrate spiritual truths. In this Gospel however instead of telling imaginary stories John uses what happens to show us who Jesus is. In particular he gives us seven signs. The first sign is turning water to wine at a wedding. The last sign is bringing his back his friend Lazarus out of the realm of death.

The purpose of these signs is to catch our attention, to draw us more deeply into reality, into fullness of life with God. And the question lying behind today’s gospel is will Martha actually see it, will this sign, help her to enter into the divine mystery. Jesus puts it this way, “Didn’t I tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God” (Jn. 11)?

When I was a young man I had this idea about religion. I thought that if you just examined all the evidence available, if you read all the theologians and philosophers from traditions around the world, then you would be able to decide what you believed. In contrast to this St. Anselm (1033-1109) writes about “faith seeking understanding” (in Latin, fides quaerens intellectum), that believing really comes first and then reason helps us to understand what our faith means. In other words faith sets in motion a quest to understand God and this leads to the joy we were created to experience.[[3]](#endnote-3)

My friend Matt Boulton compares faith to a pair of reading glasses. What looks blurry and impossible to make out, what we might otherwise miss, becomes through the eyes of faith, a picture of God’s glory. Faith helps us to see what is already there.[[4]](#endnote-4)

2. Feeling and Showing. What does the world look like through the eyes of faith? Les Murray (1938-2019) an Australian poet dedicated his books “to the glory of God.” He gives us a picture of modern people in his poem “An Absolutely Ordinary Rainbow” (1969). The poem begins and ends with verses referring to places in Sydney, Australia.[[5]](#endnote-5)

“The word goes round Repins, / the murmur goes round Lorenzinis / at Tattersalls, men look up from sheets of numbers, / the Stock Exchange scribblers forget the chalk in their hands / and men with bread in their pockets leave the Greek club: / There’s a fellow crying in Martin Place. They can’t stop him.”//

“The traffic in George Street is banked up for half a mile / and drained of motion. The crowds are edgy with talk / and more crowds come hurrying. Many run in the back streets / which minutes ago were busy main streets, pointing: / There’s a fellow weeping down there. No one can stop him.” //

“The man we surround, the man no one approaches / simply weeps, and does not cover it, weeps / not like a child, not like the wind, like a man / and does not declaim it, nor beat his breast, nor even / sob very loudly – yet the dignity of his weeping // holds us back from his space, the hollow he makes about him / in the midday light, in his pentagram of sorrow / and uniforms back in the crowd who tried to seize him / stare out at him, and feel, with amazement, their minds / longing for tears as children for a rainbow.”//

“Some will say, in the years to come, a halo / or force stood around him. There is no such thing. / Some will say they were shocked and would have stopped him / but they will not have been there. The fiercest manhood, / the toughest reserve, the slickest wit amongst us // trembles with silence, and burns with unexpected / judgements of peace. Some in the concourse scream / who thought themselves happy. Only the smallest children / and such as look out of Paradise come near him / and sit at his feet, with dogs and dusty pigeons.”//

“Ridiculous, says a man near me, and stops / his mouth with his hands, as if it uttered vomit - / and I see a woman, shining, stretch her hand / and shake as she receives the gift of weeping: / as many as follow her also receive it // and many weep for sheer acceptance, and more / refuse to weep for fear of all acceptance, / but the weeping man, like the earth, requires nothing, / the man who weeps ignores us, and cries out / of his writhen face and ordinary body //

“not words, but grief, not messages, but sorrow, / hard as the earth, sheer, present as the sea - / and when he stops, he simply walks between us / mopping his face with the dignity of one man who has wept, and now has finished weeping. // Evading believers, he hurries off down Pitt Street.”

In our modern world we are so buttoned down, so repressed, so wary of revealing anything real. We are always putting on a kind of show. This person in the poem is unlike Jesus but similar to him too. Jesus feels so deeply, sees God’s grace so clearly and expresses it. In the love that Jesus has we can be healed like, “the smallest children… who come near him.”

3. Acting and Being Helped. The last thing I want to point out is the work Lazarus needs to do when Jesus calls him out of the tomb. Imagine being wrapped in burial cloth, with your head covered and your arms bound up. It would be hard to wriggle out of that tomb that has held you for four days. Because Lazarus needs help, Jesus calls to the people around him. He says, “unbind him, and let him go” (Jn. 11).

The purpose of those seven signs in the Gospel of John, is for Jesus’ friends at all times, for Martha and Mary, for you and me, to see the glory of God – even when it is not clear to the people around us. Maybe Jesus would have been safe if he stuck with turning water into wine. But that last sign of bringing back Lazarus brought him to the attention of the authorities. They feared the Romans, and raising Lazarus made them feel as if he had to die so that the people and the temple could be safe. One person would die rather than many.

But Jesus is not just an ordinary person. Jesus is life itself and life cannot be stopped. Jesus’ weeping reminds us that God’s love cannot be stopped. Baptism is the sign which reminds us that God adopts us into the family of the church. God does this not just because we have decided to act but because when it comes to faith, every person needs the help of others. When Jesus calls us out of our caves we have the church to help.

I started by reminding us about the trauma we went through in COVID. For homework this week I want you to remember this suffering in your prayers. Come out of your cave and reach out to someone you haven’t seen since the beginning of the Pandemic.

Believing we see, “sorrow, hard as the earth, sheer, present as the sea.” And, “… a woman, shining, stretch her hand / and shake as she receives the gift of weeping: / as many as follow her also receive it.” Be unbound. “Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God” (Jn. 11)?

Images:

Pandemic Shopping Lines

St. Anselm
Les Murray

1. We wiped down our groceries but didn’t yet know that we should be wearing masks. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Herman Waetjen, *The Gospel of the Beloved Disciple: A Work in Two Editions* (New York: T&T Clark, 2005). 270ff. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. St. Augustine (354-430) of Hippo had a similar idea. Crede ut intelligas or “believe in order that you may understand.” Anselm’s idea is about the active love of God seeking a more profound knowledge of God. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Matthew Boulton, “Lazarus, Come Out!” SALT’s Commentary for All Saint’s Day,” SALT, 24 October 2021. <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2021/10/24/lazarus-come-out-salts-commentary-for-all-saintss-day> [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Les Murray, *Learning Human: Selected Poems* (NY:Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998). <https://www.griffinpoetryprize.com/awards-and-poets/shortlists/2001-shortlist/les-murray/> [↑](#endnote-ref-5)