



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE VERY REV. STEVEN L. THOMASON, DEAN AND RECTOR
THE FEAST OF ALL SAINTS
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WISDOM OF SOLOMON 3:1-9; PSLAM 24; REVELATION 21:1-6A; JOHN 11:32-44

AMNIOTIC BONDS

John 11:32-44 [*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." When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. 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." Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "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." When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" 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."]*

We have had a lot of rain recently, haven't we? I heard a bit of humor last week to help take it in stride: With all this rain, if you need an ark, I Noah guy. (Get it...)

What can we say about water on this baptismal feast day that might also serve as a prism to shed light on the mystery of All Saints, this peculiar and grand occasion when we dip our toes into the

mystical sweet communion that transcends death? To gather all this into one service with some measure of theological integrity means we must consider the amniotic waters of new life and the cavernous mystery of death and hold it all lightly enough to allow their bookended truth and beauty soak in.

Yes, there is rain, and lots of it these days...perhaps that is a place to start. One of my favorite canticles in Morning Prayer is from Isaiah who makes the poetic connections: "... rain and snow fall from heaven and return not again but water the earth, bringing forth life and giving growth, seed for sowing and bread for eating."

In the rain drop comes the grain head whose mill-ground gift will nourish us at the table this morning...

In the rain drop is the sweet substrate for the tender leaf to unfurl into its sunny purpose of catalyzing carbon dioxide into sugar, releasing oxygen for us to inspire. Take a breath in right now and feel the connection course through your body in capillary delight.

In the rain drop comes the stream and river and lake from which we drink. We are three-fourths water, and it is not our skeleton that enables us to stand erect; it is the turgid gift of watery sinew that does.

But note in all these connections the rain drop falls in its singular trajectory lighting on a surface where it merges into confluent purpose, and we are invited to ponder that trajectory in our lives, too, as we take our place in community. What is our wet trajectory of meaning in this life?

We are baptized in water for a purpose, friends. A singular experience for each of us, yet confluent in the ritualized dip. That is what baptism means—to be dipped into. Into what we might ask?

Well, community, to be sure. Received into the household of God, we say, when we welcome of newly baptized. Wet and joined together for a purpose laid out in the covenant we will all renew in a few moments once again. We unfurl into our sunny purpose of life by ordering it in light of relationship—with God, with one another, with all creation, and with ourselves. We commit to embracing this existence, with God's help. And with each other in community. We need not go it alone. I don't think it works if we do.

But there is a deeper truth into which we are dipped as baptized souls. It is about identity—our core identity as beloved of God. Each molecule of water—H₂O (three atoms, trinitarian?)—is held together by covalent bonds. They are remarkably strong and stable, requiring a great deal of energy to break them.

In baptism, we say the bond formed by and with God is indissoluble. It cannot be broken. That does not mean we cannot deny the bond and our identity as beloved. But denying it doesn't make it less true. It is always there, that bond, and always has

been. Baptism is the ritual way we remind ourselves of that.

Even Jesus needed the reminder: at his own baptism the words fall from heaven to light on his wet face: you are my beloved, with whom I am well-pleased. We are invited to let those words light on our faces, too, and know in your flesh and bones that it is true. You are God's beloved. The ritual words to remind us: You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism, and marked as Christ's own forever.

Years ago I made visits to the state penitentiary to visit men and a county jail to visit women, most of whom made their mistakes because they had never heard such words, or if they did, they heard other erosive words that convinced them it wasn't true.

Baptism is about dying to those lies, being washed clean of them, to rest in the amniotic bath of God's eternal love for you. The Hebrew word used for steadfast love and mercy of God has the same root as the word for womb. It's a beautiful image.

I am convinced the primary purpose of parents is not to teach right and wrong to their children, or to educate them, or to give them a life measured by possessions. The primary role of parents is to convey

to their children their inherent identity as beloved of God. The parent's love is proxy for that, but its source is the steadfast love of God, eternally given, always present, indissoluble. Singular in focus for you, yet universally offered to all. Oh my, how the world would change if we really believed that with all our heart and soul and mind and strength! That is the invitation of baptism.

Let me say this is the primary purpose of all religion as well, and the primary purpose of this community: to communicate this one foundational and eternal truth about the strong bonds of love and connection that God forges with us, bonds strong enough to sustain even beyond death, which is why we gather it all up here today—amniotic bonds, baptismal identity, death and the mystical communion of saints. All our work of covenantal living flows from those amniotic bonds of divine love, and none of it makes sense without that firm foundation.

Do you find it odd that we hear the story of Lazarus today? Dead four days, bound in the dark tomb. Lots of weeping. Even Jesus wept, but then as the tears ran down his face, he drew a prayerful breath in, surely trusting in his belovedness and the indissoluble bond he had with God, and called Lazarus out from the grave.

Lazarus came out, but we are left to wonder what happened next. The gospel is brilliant in that way, leaving us to consider how it must have changed Lazarus, this death and life experience.

I imagine lots of tears were shared as grief turned to joy, lots of wet cheeks touching his in a baptism of communal love.

I imagine that Lazarus, parched four days, asked for a glass of water and drank it

down with profound gratitude as its wet gift awakened his soul.

And today I imagine Lazarus, and the whole communion of saints, inviting us from the other side of the grave to believe in our belovedness. Sealed by the Holy Spirit. Marked as Christ's own forever. Received into the household of God.

May you know it in your bones to be true, this marrow of meaning.



SAINT MARK'S
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