

Every Tear
Isaiah 25: 6-9
November 4, 2018 (All Saints Day)
Rev. John Allen

One of the most pressing questions, and profound mysteries, for us is this.

“What happens after I die?”

For many of us, this might be the biggest, and most important spiritual question we face.

After all, aside from a few reports of people who have faced near death experiences we have no firsthand testimony of the afterlife, and no one comes back to tell us what it was like.

And so generation after generation, we entrust our loved ones to God’s care without knowing exactly what that is like. And we prepare our own spirits for our mortal end.

I get asked often what happens after death. It would be dishonest for me to pretend I know the answer to that question.

But there is something that I trust in my heart of hearts. God's love and care for us is not limited to our lifetime. God's love continues even past death.

I don't know whether that involves harps, and wings, clouds and robes, but I do know that it involves the presence of God, and that gives me courage, and brings me peace.

I believe that God is present to us then, as God is now. And that is enough for me, for now.

We may not be able to say with confidence what life with God after death is like, but scripture gives us some beautiful images to help us imagine.

Today's reading is from the book of Isaiah, it helps us to paint a picture of what eternal life might feel like, even if it doesn't tell us what it will look like.

The first stanza mentions “choice wines” twice, which is not a bad start.

Rich foods. Choice wine. A banquet. Does that mean literal food and drink? I don't know. But to me it means that feeling of calm and contentment that comes when you sit at a full table, with people you love, those nice moments when you can set life's regular cares aside for a moment of bliss.

And then this second beautiful image. God will wipe away every tear.

Do you remember being young? Do you remember being held close by someone whose love you didn't doubt? Do you remember someone who helped wipe your tears? Who told you it would be ok?

If so then perhaps you can begin to imagine what it is to be held in God's everlasting embrace. That can hold us through anything. That wipes the tears away. That calms our breath. And brings us home.

If you have not had that experience yet in life, you can expect it from life with God.

I offer you every ounce of my confidence in this truth to buoy your own faith and trust.

That is one way we might answer that question. What happens after I die?

We live eternally with God. We dwell in a place where God's love is perhaps all there is, and us immersed in it. The abundance of a rich feast. The comfort of our tears wiped away.

But there is another way to think about that question, one that we don't often give as much attention to, but one that is just as important to God.

"What happens after we die." As in, what happens here, after we are gone.

What do we leave behind?

In what ways will our presence echo through this world.

What have we built will outlast us?

What love have we put into others that will continue to grow when we are gone?

How will others speak of us?

What will they say about you at your funeral?

I ask not because I think we should all be preoccupied with our legacy, or spend all our time storing up and saving up for a world we will not inhabit.

I ask because this is a part of the afterlife that we can much more easily imagine.

Who has gone before you whose life still echos in yours?

Who built this church that we inhabit?

Who do you have a kind word for, or a fond memory of, even these many years after they have left this life?

There are in a sense two afterlives.

The eternal one with God.

And the way that our life leaves a residue on this world, and on these other lives.

You could spend all your days worrying about the first afterlife. Obsessing over something ultimately unknowable. Or living in fear of what is to come. But, as Jesus said, none of us by worrying could add an hour to our life. And I would say, none of us by worrying could make God love us any more. God's love for each of us is already full and complete.

So why not focus some attention on that other afterlife. The one that is a little easier to imagine?

How much love can you pour into the people you know? Love that will grow long after your last breath.

How much hope can you inspire in others? So that those who outlive you will have the confidence to continue to hope for a better world?

What can you give away now to help that world you hope for come to be?

What one thing could you do today to help bring about that world?

How will your life echo after you are gone?

This year on All Saints Sunday we stand at a sort of middle place.

We look back to celebrate all of those lives who echo into ours. We remember the dear departed saints of our own lives, and our own world. The people whose love lingers in our hearts. And whose example we strive to follow.

And we look forward. Entering this season of stewardship where we ask each member and friend of our church to commit to their financial support of the church in the coming year.

Making a generous gift to this church is only one way among so many, many, others that you can work to make your life outlast your living. You can be a part of creating this community of faith, a place where God's love takes shape and comes to life in real and tangible ways for people of all ages.

My invitation to you is to prayerfully reflect on how much you would like to give the church this year. But as you do so, broaden your prayer, expand your reflection.

Beyond what you want to give.

How do you want to serve?

How do you want to make your life shine with God's love?

What hope do you want to recommit your heart to?

What do you want to teach the children in your life, not just with your word but with your example?

One part of Stewardship is about determining how we will be good stewards of the financial gifts we have in building up this church.

But it is also about reflecting on how we will be good stewards of all the gifts God has given us, our time, our talents, our love, our energy, our hope, all of it. How will we be good stewards of all that God has given us, for the building up of all God's people. And all the world.

It's a lot to think about to be sure.

But then again, it might be the answer to the biggest question we have.

