

I don't quite know how it happened, but somehow Halloween has gotten really big. Even the pets are in it. Yesterday at the parade I saw a lot of dogs, some of them in costumes. And last week, when I took my dog to the vet, there were orange Halloween lights hung all over the reception area. Duffy had to check them out, he had to investigate—sniff and look, look and sniff. Each one of them. That's better than what he did to their magazine rack, but we won't go into that just now.

The funny thing though, is that Halloween is All Hallows Eve, the night before the real holiday, All Hallows Day, or as we also call it, All Saints Day. And the day before has gotten bigger than the day itself. Hmm.

Well, with the kids in their costumes, and our pumpkin over here (although it has seen better days) we got the opportunity to enjoy the lighter side, the Halloween side.

Now, however, we are going to worship God, and honor and remember our saints.

Of course, before we can do that we need to get clear about that word, “saints.” The New Testament meaning is: “All Christian people of every time and place.” [United Methodist Book of Worship] And, we are honoring such saints who have passed away.

That kind of stretches the meaning of the word, doesn't it? Because, so much of the time, we think of a saint as someone who was perfect, or was in the Bible, or someone who performed a miracle, or someone to name a church after, like St. Paul, or St. Luke, or St. Mark.

For All Saints Day, it is the tradition to especially remember the saints who have died in the last year, from November 1, 2008 to today. For our church, the one saint we lost to death was our beloved Alcidene Pendleton.

She was the only one—and so very dear to us that that's probably the only loss we could handle. God was good to us in that way.

It was a tough one, but as it says in the English prayer book:

“In the presence of death, Christians have sure ground for hope and confidence and even for joy, because the Lord Jesus Christ, who shared our human life and death, was raised again triumphant and lives forevermore. In him his people find eternal life.” [The Methodist Service Book]

Or, as we might say it differently, God's got more planned for us.

What is planned? Our Scriptures today help us on that.

In the Scripture lesson from Isaiah, we get what the on-line page for Bible verses calls “a vision of salvation.”

“On Mount Zion, God prepares a feast for all the peoples of the earth, destroys death, wipes every tear from all faces, and removes the disgrace of the people of Israel.” We are shown “God's determination to set creation free from the power of death.”

[United Methodist Worship page]

The scene Isaiah is describing in this vision is not heaven. No, it's what God is planning to do on this earth.

Think of that! God is going to get rid of death altogether! Good riddance!

How God is going to do this is through Jesus, God's own Son.

That brings us to the story from the Gospel of John. Jesus raised Lazarus, his good friend, from the dead! And yes, Lazarus was good and dead, four days sealed in a tomb. Even his sister said it, “Watch out for the smell.”

It was one of those miracles which Jesus did that had more than one purpose. On the one hand it was a mercy and a comfort to Lazarus and his sisters, Mary and Martha. It was also a sign to teach people that yes, Jesus is God's Son, the Messiah come to save the world, a man with the power to overcome death.

This is what the on-line source has to say about the story:

“Salvation [is] enacted. Jesus breaks the power of death over Lazarus and orders the bystanders to unwrap his grave clothes and let him go free.”

We see “God's intention and power to destroy death once and for all.” “Death is not the final answer for believers.” [United Methodist Worship page]

We aren't quite at the point when God destroys death once and for all. That is to come, at God's perfect time.

However, we are delivered “from slavery to sin and death.” Those are the words we use in our Holy Communion prayers, and they warrant some consideration.

Slavery to sin and death means being under the absolute power of them. Forced to sin. Living in terror or dying.

No, we don't have to live that way. We have Jesus, who helps us be free from those destructive powers.

Maybe it would help to think about Lazarus, the man in the story.

He had been Jesus' good friend. He had gotten sick and died. He'd been given a proper burial, with the customs of the day, wrapped up in grave clothes, and put into a tomb. The tomb was a cave, dug out of a hillside, with a big rock in front to seal it.

So Jesus had the rock moved away. Then Jesus spoke, “Lazarus, come out,” and the miracle was performed. Lazarus stopped being dead. He got up and came out of the cave.

Now the next part is a very important part, and it sometimes gets overlooked.

Lazarus came out, “a cadaver, wrapped from head to toe, and with a kerchief over his face.” [The Message]

Here's the vital part:

“Jesus orders the bystanders to unwrap Lazarus' grave clothes and let him go free.”

I think that's where we are right now, the Christians of today. We have been freed from the grave clothes, so to speak. We have been freed from all the things that were binding us, tying us down, tripping us up, making us feel that we were almost dead.

Jesus has done this for us. Jesus has set us free from the power of death and the power of sin. They're still around, but they are not in charge of us.

Lazarus went on to live some more; he kept his sisters company. Do you think he lived in fear of death, after all that had happened? I don't think so. Do you think Lazarus had a survival mentality, or a joyous attitude for living and thriving?

I think Lazarus lived the life Jesus means for all of us to live—free, joyful, in loving relationships with God, with family and friends, with everyone!

We can do that too, because we are part of the group called “All Saints.”

May it be so. Amen.

(by Rev. Sally J. DeMasters)