

May the God of all grace and boundless compassion, who has called us to glory, open our hearts and minds to God's wisdom, grant peace for our suffering hearts, anoint us with health, and support and strengthen us in our faith Amen.

At the risk of stating the obvious All Saints Day is one of those Sundays in our church year that I believe many of us approach with both trepidation and joy. It is a day to remember both death and resurrection. It is a day we feel sorrow as we join with Martha and Mary grieving the loss of their brother, Lazarus. But it is also a day when our Old and New Testament lessons paint pictures of joy and celebration. Add to this that we are now well into the 20th month of lives turned upside down and topsy turvy by the pandemic and all that it has changed in our lives and our world. All Saints Day comes at the time of year when daylight hours are quickly shrinking and the darkness of night grows longer. The beauty of the fall leaves have quickly dropped away in the past few days with frost finally coming to our area. We know winter's snow, cold and gray skies are not far behind. All these things combine with our own personal losses and may bring heaviness to our hearts. Despite the already running holiday shopping ads and promotions of the fun, wonderful family get-togethers just around the corner, our desire is really to snuggle into our sweats or other loungewear and pull our warm afghans or comforters up around us until spring.

Late last winter I was struck by some words in a prayer in a series of devotions I had begun using. "*Teach us the wisdom of fallow times and the beauty to be found in the darkness of winter.*" These words were part of a prayer from The Earth as the Original Monastery prayer cycle created by Abbey of the Arts, a virtual monastery. They are based on the book of the same name written by Abbess Christine Valters Paintner. I have been sitting with them often since last winter and God kept putting them on my heart over the past days as I reflected on my sermon for today.

We gather this morning with maybe a little more rest from added sleep last night as we turned our clocks back. We come to remember and to give thanks for the lives all our beloved family and friends who have joined with all the saints over the past year or more. How might we consider this fallow time of life and find beauty in the darkness of winter, for surely this feels like a fallow time in so many ways. It has been a hard year for everyone. Over 5 million people in the world have died from COVID, nearly 750,000 in our own country, roughly 750 deaths in Herkimer and Oneida counties combined. It has been month upon month filled with losses – losses of jobs, school days, economic stability, family members and family time. We may yearn for 'the good old days.'

Our gospel lesson reminds us that Jesus feels our sorrow and pain. Today's text only gives us half the story of Lazarus' death. Days before Jesus shows up at Mary and Martha's, the word of Lazarus being ill reaches Jesus. These are his dear friends and we might expect that Jesus would drop everything and hasten to go and see Lazarus. But he doesn't, rather he stays two more days where he was before deciding to head to Bethany. And when he says he's ready to go, his disciples try to discourage him saying it isn't safe for him. The Jewish leaders are already trying to find a way to harm Jesus. Thus by the time Jesus reaches the village Lazarus is already dead and in the tomb four days. Lots of emotions happen – Martha meets Jesus on the road, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died!' Mary too when Jesus reaches her, says, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.' Don't we often make similar statements? Why didn't you do something God so that this awful thing, whatever it is, wouldn't happen? When life is the most challenging, the saddest is when it seems God is least available, doesn't it? Yet Jesus weeps – he feels Mary and Martha's emotional pain. I envision them taking time together, hugging, wiping away each other's tears, comforting each other. And he reminds them to have faith, to believe. And then he raises Lazarus from the dead! Can you imagine the joy felt by those gathered?

I think our other texts speak well to the joy and elation the resurrection will bring. Isaiah tells us, "*...the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear. And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever. Then the Lord GOD will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken.*" Just imagine that Thanksgiving feast depicted on Price Chopper's Thanksgiving shopping ad. In Revelation we hear that there '*will be a new heaven and a new earth*' and *God will dwell among us*. We are assured of the resurrection to come and of God's presence with us now. We can sing with the psalmist, '*The Lord of hosts is the King of Glory.*' What wonderful news!

Likewise at the end of Matthew's gospel Jesus tells us, '*Lo I am with you always, even to the ends of the earth.*' We have assurance that Jesus is with us not just in joy but also in our fallow times – those times when our energy is low, we lack motivation, feel overwhelmed by the simplest tasks. The assurance of these two things – Jesus presence always with us and the promise of the resurrection allow us to rest in this fallow time.

In the August Living Lutheran magazine was a wonderful article by Erin Strybis, *The Spiritual Discipline of Rest*, just what we need in fallow times. The article begins with a story of a couple who in the middle of COVID decided to uproot and move to another state closer to relatives. It was an exhausting task and when done, they were weary. As a result they took a retreat at a center in Two Harbors, MN. The retreat facilitator reminded them that “*no matter what the future looks like, God is with us in the midst of it, active in every single moment.*” The article goes on to talk about the importance of rest and how rest is a spiritual thing. God wants us to be well – physically, emotionally, spiritually and calls us to rest. Remember God rested on the seventh day after all the work of creation. Look at nature – the trees know to rest in the winter – it's a rest that helps a tree rejuvenate so that come spring it is ready to burst forth new blossoms and leaves. Farmers know that fields need a fallow time to replenish nutrients. Continuous planting without rest leads to poor crops.

God calls us also into rest. I believe it is the purpose of these times that feel fallow in our cycles of life. Believing it doesn't make it easy to do, however. Our society constantly encourages us to do one more thing, keep busy, shop early if you want delivery. When we are in our homes, our digital gadgets pull at us – emails, text messages, screen time, even all those ‘self-care’ suggestions are burdensome. Even our ELCA slogan, *God's Work, Our Hands*, moves us to ‘do.’ And yes, God does call us to love and to show that love through our service, BUT how can we do that if we are depleted? Resting is key to rejuvenation, to our having capacity to give that love. Resting with God is how God shares God's love with us and for us. Anthony Bateza, an assistant professor at St. Olaf College says, “*Rest is part of what God intends for creation and part of Godself. All things are created and connected to God. Rest is for all people, not just Christians.*”

Professor Bateza goes on to share that “*we can hear God more easily when we feel that we're at rest. There has to be time for prayer and quiet stillness. A reminder it's God that's doing the work...*”

We can't drop our leaves or let our sap run to our roots like trees but we can be intentional about making time to settle into a slower time – even if it is 5 or 10 minutes a day. It might be a quiet time of centering prayer. I practice a cycle of morning and evening prayer each of which includes 3 minutes of silence – some days those are the longest 3 minutes of the day. At other times the 3 minutes flies by. As we move from All Saints Day toward Advent and into the winter of the earth's rotation cycle, let's each consider ways we can rest – use this fallow time for rekindling and rejuvenating our souls. Rest habits could include prayer,

meditation, journaling, walking, yoga or maybe some other form of exercise. In the midst of COVID last winter my yoga instructor would say at the beginning and ending of each on-line class, *'I'm glad you showed up today.'* Some days 'showing up' was all I could do. Lying on my yoga mat and listening to her voice walking us through the positions was as much as I could do. But it was a start.

In these coming days, may we all give ourselves permission to rest into the fallow times, to reach out for God's love and care and open our hearts to receive God's love and care. May we be intentional about integrating some time into each day for five minutes of quiet prayer and meditation or a quiet contemplative walk in out in God's beautiful winter creation. In those spaces listen to the trees, the birds, and to the quiet of your beating heart, feel the sun, see the stars; and listen for God's whispering voice. Rest in the quiet of God's love and in the knowledge of Jesus' promise of the resurrection, that day when we will join with all the saints. The day when as Carrie Newcomer writes in the chorus of her song, *Gathering of Spirits,*

*There's a gathering of spirits
There's a festival of friends
And we'll take up where we left off
When we all meet again.*

Rest in peace. Amen.