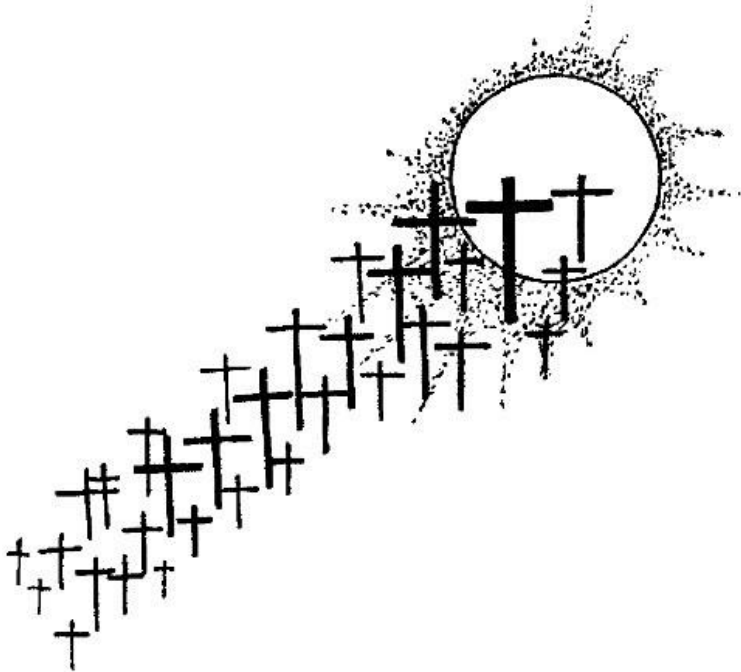


All Saints Sunday
November 7, 2021
“My Father’s House”
A Sermon Based on John 14:1-4
By Rev. Ruth Ragovin

John 14:1-4 (Revised Standard Version) ~ “Let not your hearts be troubled; believe in God, believe also in me. ²In my Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? ³And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. ⁴And you know the way where I am going.”



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Not so long ago, I received an extraordinary present, one that seemed like a gift from God to help me prepare for today's All Saint's Sunday worship celebration and message and also to bring me comfort because I too have lost some loved ones this past year. In addition to missing Donnie Hendrix every single day, I am still grieving the death of my sister-in-law Eileen to Covid-19. This extraordinary gift relates to Jesus' words of comfort and promise as recorded in John 14, when he said to his disciples and to us as we worry about death, both of our loved ones and ourselves: ***"Do not let your hearts be troubled. ... In my Father's house there are many rooms ... I go to prepare a place for you ... so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way where I am going."*** And John reports the ever curious and questioning and sometimes annoying Thomas asking Jesus, ***"Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?"***⁶ ***Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life."***

So this was the gift I received (*show Life magazine*). The date is July 1, 1957. My mother was already in the early states of labor with me and two days later, on July 3, 1957, I entered the world at St. Elizabeth Hospital in Belleville, IL. So the week of my birth, on the front cover of Life magazine—the most widely read general interest weekly magazine of that time—we find the words "I Am the Way, the Truth, and the Life," along with a picture of the evangelist Billy Graham, who was leading a massive crusade at that time at Madison Square Gardens.

There is a lengthy article about the crusade and Billy Graham's evangelistic fervor, along with a response from one of my father's professors and mentors at that time—Dr. Reinhold Niebuhr, who believed that Billy Graham's theology was rather simplistic—just recite a simple formula and be saved—and another response by the Rev. Dr. John Sutherland Bonnell, minister at the famed Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in NYC, who wrote that Billy was "helping NY's spiritual life." Now even though Reinhold Niebuhr and even perhaps my theologian father (who was a professor at Harvard during my early years) kind of looked down on Billy Graham, Graham was always an extremely important figure to me because of his influence on my paternal grandmother Adele Mellen Richardson.

Life wasn't always easy for my Grandma Adele. Her husband divorced her when she was in her forties and she always struggled to make ends meet. This was during the time when even highly educated professional women (such as my Grandma, who had a degree from Simmons Women's College in Boston) were paid but a fraction of their male counterparts.

She was a skilled nutritionist and even helped develop some of the early recipes for Stauffers frozen food, including their mac and cheese and lasagna (so whenever you eat them, remember that you are partaking of my secret family recipes!). She should have been making a 6-figure income for her contributions but instead she lived just barely at the poverty level.

Grandma worked really hard, lived in a tiny apt outside Cleveland, drove old cars that always seemed to be breaking down, had really bad asthma, and bad scoliosis too (from her I inherited my hunched back). Grandma always wrote me detailed encouraging letters. It was when I was thirteen and living in Germany that she wrote me a letter in which she told me that she had attended a Billy Graham revival in Cleveland, Ohio, had been “saved” after making “a decision for Christ.” Following that her letters were filled with Bible verses and she always wrote me about how she was growing in faith and her relationship with Jesus. She told me that she was praying for me every single day.

Then one morning, while still in Germany and 14 years old, I received a phone call that my Grandma had died that Easter Sunday morning due to complications from a seemingly harmless and easy surgery on her hand. In fact, it was the same hand surgery that I recently had but an area around her catheter had gotten infected and that was why she died. But before she had gone to the hospital for this simple surgery, she had put one final letter in the mail to me, which arrived in Germany about two weeks after her death, in which she shared with me the Bible verse that she found most important, which reads in the RSV that she used: ***Let not your hearts be troubled; believe in God, believe also in me. ²In my Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? ³And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.*** (John 14:1-4 RSV)

A year and a half later, I found myself very ill in the Shanta Bhawan Hospital in Kathmandu, Nepal. Because of a fuel shortage caused by an oil embargo and roads blocked from landslides, the hospital, which had been founded by two Western medical missionaries, had run out of the antibiotics that were needed to treat the advanced double bronchial pneumonia that I was suffering from. I had carried my Grandma’s last letter, along with some other keepsakes, with me and as I lay there in my weakened state I read again the scripture verse from John 14 that promises an after life: ***Let not your hearts be troubled; believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house are many rooms.***

A few days later, as my condition suddenly worsened, I had a dramatic spiritual awakening that changed the course of my life as I experienced myself leaving my body, and being embraced by a love and light that was so powerful that I knew without any doubt that the life we have on earth is only one tiny fraction of the larger, eternal existence we have been purposefully created for and called into. I felt as though cradled in the heart of a presence that can only be described by words like amazing, wondrous, beautiful, forgiving, freeing, compassionate, merciful, joyous, expansive, light, love. At some point my consciousness reentered my body. And from that moment on I have not wavered for a second in my firm belief that love is stronger than death and after this life there is more life.

But there was much more to this “tunnel” experience than being embraced by love and light. I also encountered my Grandmother Adele in a space and time beyond this world. This was an entirely Christian experience, which we affirm through the Christian doctrine of the Communion of the Saints, which states that our loved ones who have passed on will one day welcome us when we too have crossed over the threshold into eternity. I continue to feel my grandmother’s presence with me along with so many of our loved ones from our congregation who have passed away during the past twelve years I have been here.

Last Sunday a number of us watched the amazing animated movie *Coco*, which is about the Mexican festival known as the Days of the Dead. On November 1 and 2 (when in the church we celebrate what are known as All Saints and All Souls Days), altars are built to loved ones who have died, their favorite foods eaten, and memories about them shared as they gather at graves and experience the presence of loved ones. These Christian beliefs in an afterlife where we will again be reunited with loved ones is something I absolutely affirm. In fact, I am even more sure of this than I am of the certainties of my earthly life. Our home here is but temporary. Our true home is our eternal dwelling place. And while it is natural to be afraid of the suffering that often accompanies the dying process, we should not be afraid of death itself. For death itself is the ultimate home going. We might call it “heaven.”

Heaven! There are all kinds of speculations and emotions around heaven and this particular piece of scripture. Apparently (as told by Donald B. Strobe), when the Revised Standard Version of the Bible was first published in 1952, a pastor in North Carolina was so disturbed by the new translation that he gathered up all the copies he could find and had a public Bible-burning. What upset the pastor so much was that while the King

James Version of John 14:2 says, "In my father's house there are many mansions," the RSV translates it "In my Father's house are many rooms." The North Carolina pastor was infuriated at the "cheapskates" who translated the RSV. He said that he had been promised a mansion in the sky in the King James Version and nobody, but nobody, was going to cheat him out of it! (www.sermons.com)

Of course, there are all kinds of conjectures of what heaven must be like. On the light side, are all the pearly gates jokes. Like this one, that I'm sure many of you will be able to relate to:

"A cab driver reaches the pearly gates. St. Peter looks him up in his Big Book and tells him to pick up a gold staff and a silk robe and proceed into Heaven.

Next in line is a preacher. St. Peter looks him up in his Big Book, furrows his brow and says, "Okay, we'll let you in, but take that cloth robe and wooden staff."

The preacher is shocked and replies, "But I am a man of the cloth. You gave that cab driver a gold staff and a silk robe. Surely I rate higher than a cabbie!"

St. Peter responds matter-of-factly, "This is Heaven and up here, we are interested in results. When you preached, people slept. When the cabbie drove his taxi, people prayed." (circling on the internet)

And there is this great kind of travelogue that Ruth Daughaday gave me, which is called *"The Visitor's Guide to the Afterlife: Where to Go, What To Do, Where to Eat and Other Heavenly Hints."* It's got all kinds of important advice on things like "How much money to bring for the toll at the Tunnel," what number sunscreen to pack, where to shop for divine bargains, whether to hire a chariot or take the Soul Train, the best ways to kill time in limbo, what to do for nightlife after death, sightseeing and other side trips, what to say to angels, saints, and prophets you might meet (e.g., If you meet Moses, ask to see his Red Sea slides; If you come across St. Jude, tell him how much you liked that Beatles song; and never, ever offer St. Peter a gratuity).¹

But now on a more serious note. We can have all these jokes about heaven because, at a deep level, we are somewhat nervous. We mask our fear with laughter. Yet did you know that 85% of the American population believes in an afterlife.

¹ Annie Pigeon, *The Visitor's Guide to The Afterlife: Where to Go, What to Do, Where to Eat, and Other Heavenly Hints* (NY: Kensington Books, 1995), p. 39.

Even so we hesitate. We have no idea what it is like. We don't have a photograph of it, after all. There is no heaven Facebook page you can "like"!

After my spiritual awakening in Nepal, I knew with an absolute certainty that love is stronger than death and after this life there is more life. I have been unwavering in my commitment to that belief and to being a follower of Jesus ever since because, for me, Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. But I was afraid to tell people of my Near-Death Experience lest they would think that I was crazy. But I've come out of the closet about this because in my over 25 years with my husband Russ serving churches, I have talked to person after person who either have had a similar experience themselves, or knew someone who had, or who have had a loved one pass away and in relation to this person either were told by that person as they were transitioning from this world to the next that they were receiving glimpses of the other side, were seeing persons who had passed on, or, after that person's death believed that they had been visited by them or received a communication from them. In fact, I know of at least three people in our congregation who have had such experiences.

But it wasn't just talking to people that made me realize that my near-death experience was universal. I also chanced upon a book (*show book*) called *Voices from the Edge of Eternity* compiled by John Myers back in 1968, which contains about a hundred testimonies from the thousands over a 2,000-year time span that he had gathered by people (young and old, saint and sinner) who "just before leaving this life, saw beyond the grave", giving evidence to our immortality. Did any of you read the 1992 #1 NY Times bestselling book by Beatty J. Eadie called *Embraced by the Light* in which she writes in great detail of her near-death experience in which she met Jesus?

There are also two really incredible books that have come out over the last few years that speak to this understanding that there is way more than just our lives on earth. I really urge you all to read them! First, Anita Moorjani, in her memoir written from Hong Kong, *Dying to be Me: My Journey from Cancer, to Near Death, to True Healing*, relates how, after fighting cancer for almost four years, her body began shutting down. As her organs failed, she entered into an extraordinary near-death experience where she realized her inherent worth . . . and the actual cause of her disease . . . and the certainty of a divine presence and an afterlife. Upon regaining consciousness, Anita found that her condition had improved so rapidly that she was able to be released from the hospital within weeks . . . without a trace of cancer in her body!

Second and, in my view, most importantly, is the book *Proof of Heaven: A Neurosurgeon's Journey into the Afterlife* by the neurosurgeon Dr. Eben Alexander, which we discussed a few years ago in Head and Heart. Even the skeptics in our group were persuaded by parts of it. Dr. Alexander himself underwent an out-of-body journey when the neocortex part of the brain that controls thought and emotion and makes us human had shut down, while his body was under minute medical observation for the seven days of his coma. What he experienced is simply amazing, especially as he came to an understanding that our brains do not in and themselves produce consciousness but rather participate in a larger consciousness we all are part of. This is a truly revolutionary view!

Now, of course, we won't know until we leave these earthly bodies what the afterlife Jesus speaks about in this passage will be like. We don't know what the rooms (or perhaps mansions) in God's house will be like. For we now see as through a glass darkly. Yet, one day, like all of those we named in today's All Saints Remembrances, we will see face to face. We will be reunited with our loved ones. What is clear, above all, is that we are but passersby on this earth, which is but our temporary home. So, in closing, let us stand upon the promises of Jesus, who says to us this All Saints Sunday: ***"Let not your hearts be troubled; believe in God, believe also in me. ² In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? ³ And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. ⁴ And you know the way where I am going."***

Let us pray...