

November 1, 2009 Isaiah 25:6-9; Psalm 24; Revelation 21:1-6a; John 11:32-44

Bad joke: Pastor David likes to start out his sermons with a good joke. I have a joke for you this morning, but it's not necessarily a good one! Usually, someone tells this when you are on a car trip and they lean forward as your passing a cemetery as they ask, "How many people do you think are dead in that cemetery?" Of course, they are hoping that because you are tired from the traveling that you will make a guess as to the number. Of course, the punch-line that they will give as they slap their leg: "All of them!" I told you, it was a bad joke, but it does tell us what we all have in common – death. No matter what we do to stay healthy and extend our life, at some point, we are all going to die.

Story: As a kid, my sister, Andrea, and my cousin, Kathleen, dared my cousin, Karrie, and myself to go up the hill and walk through the cemetery at night, without a flashlight. We actually did it, but when we reported back, they didn't believe us. Cemeteries were never really spooky places for me, even as a kid. I can remember walking around and looking at the gravestones for names, dates and reading epitaphs. It was always interesting to see if we could find the oldest one. As an adult, I learned that cemeteries in large cities were great places to run. They were quiet, didn't have a lot of traffic and were a peaceful place. I guess for me, it was a way to be connected to those saints who have died.

Today, we celebrate the saints – those who have died, which you will be invited to light a candle for in the worship service today – and for the living – especially those who have recently joined through baptism. Our scripture passages today are a combination of ones that show up in funeral services for the very reason that they remind us that death does not have the final word and that we are promised comfort, as well as to be with God.

Our gospel story from John today is the powerful story/image of Jesus raising Lazarus. First, it is powerful because we are told that Jesus weeps for his friend Lazarus! Jesus weeps with those who mourn! Then, we get the unbelievable story of Lazarus being commanded to come out of the tomb – and he does. He is unbound! Of course, we do know that Lazarus will eventually have a physical death, but here in John's gospel he is unbound for service and witness. Isn't that really the case? We can be unbound from the things that bind us and kill us. We, too, are unbound/freed in order to serve and to witness!

This gospel story also points to the powerful relationship that Christ has for each one of us. It points to his own death and resurrection and he unbinds each one of us from our sin and draws us into the freedom to be a servant and a witness to his grace.

I'd like to share with you a powerful story from Walt Wangerin's book Mourning into Dancing.

The Cherry Tree: A Parable by Walt Wangerin (p 266-268)

(He writes) When I was a boy, I told people that my father was stronger than anyone else in the world. He was a handsome man in those days. He had a curl of hair at the middle of his forehead, and brown eyes, and a pulsing muscle in his jaw. And he loved me. So I would go out on the front porch and roar to the neighborhood: "My daddy's arm is as strong as trucks! The strongest man in the world."

My mother came out and said, "Are you trying to start a fight with someone?"

I said, "Nope."

She said, "Then what do you mean by shouting?"

I said, "Robbers beware. A strong man lives in this house."

"Well" she said, "Wally beware. Big words, big deeds, you know."

When my mother went back inside the house, I bellowed, "My daddy's the strongest man in the world. Big words, big deeds, you know!" I had no idea what that meant. But momma did.

In those days a cherry tree grew in our backyard. This was my hiding place. Ten feet above the ground a stout limb made a horizontal fork, a cradle on which I could lie face-down, reading, thinking, being alone. Nobody bothered me here. Even my parents didn't know where I went to hide. Sometimes Daddy would come out and call, "Wally? Wally?" but he didn't see me in the leaves. I felt very tricky. Then came the thunderstorm. It was usual for me to dream in my tree and therefore not to notice changes in the weather. So if the sky grew dark or gave any warning, I didn't see it.

One day suddenly, a wind tore through the backyard and struck my cherry tree with such force that it ripped the limb from my hands and nearly threw me from the limb. I locked my arms around the forking branches and hung on. My head hung down between them. I tried to wind my legs around the limb, but the whole tree was wallowing in the wind. "Daddy!" The sky grew absolutely black. Dust whirled higher than the house. I saw a lightning bolt drop from heaven, then there was a perfect calm, and then the thunder crashed.

"Daddy! Daddy! Daddy!" The whole tree bowed down and rose again, and the wind blew my shirt up to my shoulders, and the rain hit like bullets, and I thought that my arms were going to slip from the branches. "Daddeeeee!"

There he was. I saw his face at the back door, peering out. Lightning stuttered in the sky. "Out here! Up here! I'm here! Daddy, come get me!" The branches swept up and down,

like huge waves on an ocean – and Daddy saw me, and right away he came out into the wind and the weather, and I felt so relieved because I just took it for granted that he would climb right up the tree to get me.

But that wasn't his plan at all. He came to a spot right below me and lifted his arms and shouted, "Jump."

"What?"

"Jump. I'll catch you."

Jump? I had a crazy man for a father. He was standing six or seven miles beneath me, holding up two skinny arms and telling me to jump. If I jumped, he'd miss. I'd hit the ground and die. I screamed, "No!" At least I could feel the bark of the branches against my body. "No!" I made up my mind. I'd stay right here till the storm was over. I closed my eyes and hung on. But the wind and the rain slapped that cherry tree, bent it back, and cracked my limb at the trunk. I dropped a foot. My eyes flew open. Then the wood whined and splintered and sank, and so did I, in bloody terror.

No, I did not jump. I let go. I surrendered. I fell. In a fast, eternal moment I despaired and plummeted. This, I thought, is what it's like to die – But my father caught me. And my father squeezed me to himself. I wrapped my arms and legs around him and felt the scratch of his whiskers on my face and began to tremble and began to cry. He caught me. Oh, my daddy – he had strong arms indeed. Very strong arms.

But it wasn't until I actually experienced the strength that I also believed in it. And I myself did not choose so frightening an experience. The storm did. Horrible storm. Wonderful storm. It granted me what I had had all along, but what I had not trusted. A father with arms as strong as trucks.

You see. We do not need to fear death. It is not the end and it does not have the final word. Death is just something along the way from life to eternal life! The promise is that are Father is waiting for us; to catch us when we fall.

Helpful Resources: [Mourning into Dancing](#), Walt Wangerin, Jr.; Henry Langknecht, Trinity Lutheran Seminary at workingpreacher.org; [revgalblog](#)