

*The Next Great Adventure*  
Wisdom 3:1-9; Revelation 7:15-17  
Sermon by Joanne Gallardo  
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Wisdom 3:1-9

1The souls of the righteous are in the hand of God,<sup>a</sup> and no torment shall touch them. 2They seemed, in the view of the foolish, to be dead; and their passing away was thought an affliction 3and their going forth from us, utter destruction. But they are in peace.<sup>b</sup> 4For if to others, indeed, they seem punished, yet is their hope full of immortality; 5Chastised a little, they shall be greatly blessed, because God tried them and found them worthy of himself.<sup>c</sup> 6As gold in the furnace, he proved them, and as sacrificial offerings<sup>\*</sup> he took them to himself.<sup>d</sup> 7In the time of their judgment<sup>\*</sup> they shall shine and dart about as sparks through stubble;<sup>e</sup> 8They shall judge nations and rule over peoples, and the LORD shall be their King forever.<sup>f</sup> 9Those who trust in him shall understand truth, and the faithful shall abide with him in love: Because grace and mercy are with his holy ones,<sup>g</sup> and his care is with the elect.

Revelation 7:15-17

For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them.<sup>16</sup> They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat <sup>17</sup>for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

Last year I preached an All Soul's day sermon after the actual All Souls day, so I was inclined to do the same this year. Around this time of year, not just because of the liturgical season, people (myself included) start to think about family and loved ones. We start planning for the holidays, we wonder who we're hosting, we plan our travels, we buy gifts, we start cooking a lot...and we also remember. We think about the person we don't get to buy for this year. We have an empty spot at our table that used to be occupied. We think of the lively, or caring, or calm spirit that graced our lives and our families with their presence, soul, and life force. And whether this loss is recent or from decades past, we mourn again. This is a time of year when loss is just as present as hope and joy. And some of us can carry onward, and some of us are overcome. Some of us exist in the space between the two.

There have been times when the thought of the afterlife comforts me, and other times it doesn't. In doing grief work with folks over the years, I've found that some folks cling onto the thought of heaven with great fervor and earnest, knowing that their loved one is looking down on them and keeping a sort of "guardian" status from beyond the grave. For others, this can be triggering, and the finality of death is just too big a shadow to move beyond to some sort of eschatological "zen" space. I don't know a whole lot but I do know what can be helpful and what oftentimes isn't helpful. It's not helpful to say, "God wanted another flower in God's garden." It's not helpful to say, "This is God's will." It certainly doesn't help to encourage people to cheer up, move on, and persevere. Those are not honest statements for me to speak. For me, my response is to answer with complete honesty from my own experience, saying "What happens after we die is a mystery to me, but daily I actively choose to live into the hope that those I love who have gone on are now at peace, and rest in the arms of a loving and gracious God." This is also, more or less, how I choose to talk about death with children, who seem to be especially attuned to the concepts of life and death. What I know to be helpful is to bear witness to another person's hurt and loss, to allow them the dignity of feeling their hurt and pain. The author Parker Palmer writes, "The human soul doesn't want to be advised or fixed or saved. It simply wants to be witnessed, exactly as it is." As a pastor, I believe I am called to witness other people's pain, not to fix and certainly not to save.

I have never preached on an Apocryphal text before. Even though I often attended Mass with my father, I don't actually remember hearing anything from these non-canonical books. In college, I learned of the wealth of wisdom and insight into the spiritual life that these books held. While I don't hold these texts in the same regard as I do the Bible that many of us reference today, I think we would be doing ourselves a disservice if we didn't take a look into what holy men and women did and thought during that period in history. Also, I think we should be open to what our Catholic and Orthodox friends consider to be part of the Holy Scriptures.

Here's what I have learned about the Book of Wisdom. It's part of the "Wisdom Books" of the Bible along with Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Job, Psalms, and

Proverbs. It's a Jewish work, written in Greek. It's dated to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century BC. It echoes much of the same wisdom books of the Old Testament, and it points our orientation in terms of wisdom to God. Chapter 3 drew me in with the header "On Suffering." To gain wisdom on suffering is one of the major things I hope to achieve as I age and have more life experience. The Bible has a lot to say on suffering, but I'm always open to hearing more.

In this text, the author takes suffering head on. We are immediately comforted. The souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and no torment shall touch them. Immediately, we are reassured that our loved ones are no longer in pain, nor do they fear, for they are in God's hands. People who are foolish think they succumbed to affliction, but those whose faith is in the Lord know that they rest in power.

When I was involved in the Black Lives Matter Movement in Washington DC, at each meeting and rally we mentioned the names we knew of black folk who had died at the hands of the police. After their names were said we'd do a benediction of sorts by saying together "rest in power." Personally, I would like people to remember that we want people to rest in power AND peace. But I understand the sentiment of the desire to rest in power. If we paid attention to all the death in the world, we would become overwhelmed. But I also would like us to focus at least some attention on the lives that may not affect our everyday life but should affect us nonetheless. The senseless deaths that happen because of our obsession with guns, addiction to violence, our lack of access to mental health services, institutional racism, and toxic masculinity adds to the corporate "we" as Christians are called to love and serve those whom Jesus loved. The concept of "resting in power" has the connotation that the loved one's death was socially unjust and not at all peaceful. By wishing that the person rest in power, we assert that we strive for peace, but act and move in ways that are powerful and enact change. It is my hope that those who have been killed in recent days due to mass shootings, natural disasters, or acts of violence can rest in both peace and power, while those of us in the here and now work nonviolently to reform institutions, to heal our environment, and to speak truth to other structures of power.

The apocryphal text tells us that as mortal people, we see death as an “affliction.” And because we live in the here and now, I have a hard time imagining death being seen in another light. Not everyone dies when they are old and ready to go on to the next world. When young or middle aged people pass, we can’t move past the tragic nature of it. And I think that’s ok. This scripture is not chastising people for feeling sad, or angry, or for feeling grief. There is no admonition from the author. We are told they are at peace. This is a “yes, and” situation. “Yes,” their parting from us was too soon, “and” they are at peace.

A glimpse into what this is like is given to us in the book of Revelation, chapter 7. We are told that those gathered around the throne are not hungry, nor are they thirsty. God is sheltering them, creating a tent around them, keeping them away from heat and discomfort. They will be guided to wellsprings of eternal life, and what’s most encouraging of all, every tear will be wiped away from their eye.

It’s impossible to be in this world without pain. And each of us feels pain differently. Some of us feel it deeply and know it intimately at a young age, others are acquainted with it later in life, and for others, pain may be something experienced only in small doses. I don’t believe God is into “pain Olympics,” comparing one’s suffering over another’s, but God is interested in the act of comforting those who have died, wiping every tear from their eye, as the Scripture says. We are assured that whatever pain one encounters in life will be comforted by the hand of God. Grace and mercy are given to those who are now in God’s care.

In a way, all this sounds nice, but what about us? Sure, it’s comforting to know our loved ones are no longer in pain, but what about their absence? What about their legacy, their work, the joy they brought to our lives? What are we supposed to tell children, or other people that depended on them? Why does it all just seem so unjust? What about our own comfort?

What about the death of those we don’t know, but whose lives touch ours all the same? The immigrants who die in detention centers, unarmed Black men across the country who die at the hands of those who are supposed to serve and protect? How many people have to die for there to be change? How much blood

needs to be spilled for us to bring about the Kingdom of God here on earth, a kingdom that turns swords into plowshares? When will people turn away from the sin of racism and violence and dedicate themselves to the ways that make for both peace AND justice?

I think these are completely valid questions. And I don't have any easy answers. I myself have been uncomfortable with the "easy answer" of those who have died being at peace. While I know that to be true, and partings being an inevitable part of life, I'm still not quite ok. I'm not ok with the death happening around me. And I'm not ok when I have to part with dear and beloved people. And that, in itself, I also believe is also ok.

One death I struggle with is the death of my friend Sarah, not her real name, who was a Harrisonburg friend who died a few weeks after I moved to DC. This is the second time Sarah has made it into one of my sermons, and I'm convinced I could do a sermon series on the scriptures that Sarah illustrated to me through her life and love. Sarah was a really smart person, a caring person, someone who had been in a helping profession who struggled with anorexia so badly our get togethers were often intense and brief before she had to enter treatment again. Some days she was so ill, her appearance made her seem like she was hovering somewhere in between life and death. She had been trained to save lives, but she could not save her own, even though she tried program after program, read book after book, and put her mind to it more times than anyone could count. She struggled with eating and with exercise and the combination ended up killing her. Her life was short and tragic, marred by her inability to be perfect, which is the only thing she ever wanted. She died in an assisted living facility due to complications of her eating disorder.

The more I got to know Sarah, the more I saw that she really had no control over this monster that was her eating disorder. And it didn't just appear out of nowhere, childhood trauma and the desire to be a "perfect Mennonite girl" crept into this need to be fiercely loved. For Sarah, the thinner she was, the more loveable she could be. She told me she wanted to stop her habits. That she had cut back on her exercising. And I believed her, because I saw her working at it. But

the monster in her closet would always claim her. I don't at all believe she was weak-willed, or too much of a control freak, or too much of a perfectionist, as some told her. I think that's victim blaming to the nth degree. She was so entrenched in certain behaviors that those behaviors took her life.

At the end, when I last saw her, she wanted peace. But she also wanted to live. She didn't get to live, but I do hope she found her peace. But she saw no justice while being alive on earth, and she suffered constantly. People who loved her left her, grew tired of her, and told her she could change if she really wanted to. You could no sooner ask a blind person to see.

I don't believe it was in God's grand scheme for Sarah to die as she did, but I do think our relationship was part of God's plan. She loved God, prayed though much of her day, and read scripture with such drama and flair that I think she'd make a drama professor nervous. She taught me that life isn't always fair. Life doesn't always mean you feel great. But that doesn't mean you don't work to show God's love to those around you. That doesn't mean you give up trying to be closer to your community and your God. That doesn't mean that you don't try, period. For my ordination, Sarah came and sat in the back so she could slip out without being seen, and avoid the drama of people commenting on her appearance. The day after, she came by my house and gave me a clinging cross. If there's an image of something that comes to mind when I remember Sarah, it's clinging onto signs of hope. So I still have this cross, and I clutch it when things don't seem fair, or are out of my control, and I remember Sarah.

I can't understand why God didn't intervene in Sarah's rehabilitation. Why she didn't get to experience the freedom from her addiction. But the words of the author of the Book of Wisdom tell me that I don't get to understand everything, and that my point of view is limited in its scope. And one day, I will come to better understand things, and that anger and sadness are ok, as long as I take a lesson from Sarah and cling on to hope, and show love to those around me.

In thinking about this loss, I have come to understand how tragedy and blessedness can exist in the same person, finding a home in both life and death. I am comforted to know they are now comforted, and while I have reason to be

upset, I don't have a reason to prevent me from giving my own flawed self to others in service, in kindness, and in acts of mercy as would our Lord Jesus Christ. In this death I am both comforted in spirit and agitated into action.

The text says those who trust him will understand truth. I don't think the text is just talking about those who have passed on, I think it's talking about us, as well. Surely after we die, we hope to encounter better understanding and the fullness of truth. But those of us on earth can understand truth, as Paul would say, "though a glass dimly." I know that the resurrection is true, that we rejoice knowing that Jesus has proved to us that death does not have the final say. I know justice is true. God is the harbinger of justice, and the keeper of all that is good, just, right, and fair. And one day I'll be able to ask all of my angry, sad, hopeless, and eager questions. I know love is true, and that love is a gift. Just as God loves us, we are to love others, no matter what happens. Love doesn't stop with death, as Jesus proved through his death and resurrection. Love is one of the most immortal things we are allowed to possess. It can change, but it doesn't die or fade away though a parting. It's the cord that keeps us connected to one another through the corporal and the eternal. Love is probably the truest thing I know.

This leaves us to contemplate our own mortality. We do all we can to prevent the decay of our bodies, to prolong life and delay death as much as possible. Death is a big unknown, and it's only natural for us to fear it. For those who've had to fight for their lives, more time on earth is being ahead of the fight. At some point, we fight as much as we can and death seems to have the last say. If there's one thing I'm hearing from our wisdom text, it's to not be afraid. Don't give in to feelings of defeat, as if you've "lost" and death has somehow "won" because as we know, death has not won. Death is not the end of things, as Jesus exemplified in his resurrection. Death is, as quoted in Harry Potter, "the next great adventure" to the well-organized mind. And Jesus tells us as much when he tells us he goes and prepares a place for us. Our feelings concerning death are valid, but we can also rest in the knowledge that God holds our next great adventure for us, whenever that time comes though whatever circumstance. God's grace and mercy are with God's holy ones, and God's care is with those who love God, as our passage states. In knowing this, may we act here and now as if our life and

others' lives depend on it. Let us breathe deeper knowing that our next great adventure is waiting in the arms of our creator. Let us grieve and yet hope remembering the lives of those who have gone on before us. May the peace of our Lord Jesus Christ, which passes all understanding, dwell in our minds, in our hearts, and on our lips. Amen.