

**"The Eternal Seeping
Through the Physical"**

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The Thirty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time

Irish theologian and poet John O'Donohue wrote this about the saints:

The dead are not distant or absent. They are alongside us. When we lose someone to death, we lose their physical image and presence, they slip out of visible form into invisible presence. This alteration of form is the reason we cannot see the dead. But because we cannot see them does not mean that they are not there (Beauty).

And from Francis Weller:

It was through the dark waters of grief that I came to touch my unlived life, by unleashing tears I had never shed for the losses in my world. Grief led me back into a world that was vivid and radiant. There is some strange intimacy between grief and aliveness, some sacred exchange between what seems unbearable and what is most exquisitely alive (The Wild Edge of Sorrow).

Differing messages on the mystery of death on this All Saints' Sunday. These are different from what I was taught but are things I hear with regularity. O'Donohue said in a taped interview that in Ireland, one is indoctrinated from the beginning about both the visible and the invisible worlds living side by side. I was taught in Sunday school that hell was down and heaven was up and after death and all 'good' people were taken into heaven with God; I do not remember any expectation that they would linger here in the neighborhood. And through a series of losses on my dad's side of the family when I was young – rather than come to understand the power of grief, I became afraid of loss. Jesus told his disciples that he was going to prepare a place for them and that they would know the way. It is our friend Thomas, called the doubter, who stated the obvious, "Lord we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way" (John 14:5)? How can we understand?

But then we sent rockets into space, and, by many means made scientific discoveries about the composition of the earth, the Sunday school lessons about the location of heaven and hell became quaint/old-fashioned and O'Donohue's image became very popular. I wonder, have you re-located either of them in your mind's eye? C. S. Lewis' image of 'Aslan's Country' in his last Narnia tales is my most vivid vision of heaven – after the Narnians pass through the doorway of the stable, they find themselves in a place where everything is much more beautiful, more flavorful, and more real – not the "shadow copy" world that "has a beginning and an end" but a place of eternal beauty where the presence of Aslan actualizes life after death which is the "real life."

Narnia has been far more preferable to me than the book of Revelation, I have a love/hate relationship with the apocalyptic because, on the one hand, it has some of the most beautiful and expressive language about God and a life of faith; but on the other hand, it is a written mystery that many want to read as a code; it has violent images that some readers feel the need to work toward on God's behalf; and as first two would indicate, it is prone to misinterpretation. Lewis' 'last battle' is not about lakes of fire, not even actually about the battle itself, but about staying faithful to the end.

Both O'Donohue and Lewis are interpreting scripture for us using folklore. There is plenty to interpret: Jacob had a dream of angels descending and ascending a ladder between heaven and earth and at Jesus baptism the skies were torn open and the Holy Spirit appeared. There are many examples in the scriptures of the openings between (what I will continue to term) heaven and earth, though there are more visitations of heavenly beings than a presences of those who have died. In truth God's location is both the visible and invisible, both worldly and otherworldly and so I found George McLeod's phrase "the eternal seeping into the physical" to be very meaningful today.

What we can know and celebrate for our loved ones who have died is that they are the beloved children of God and that they have salvation! There is a multitude of saints from every nation and every tribe singing: "Salvation belongs to our God, ... and to the Lamb" (Rev. 7:10), ultimately, this is the Good News of Jesus Christ! But this is where the opening between heaven and earth, the living and the dead, or the visible and the invisible bumps into our quaint old Sunday school lessons – salvation is not just at the end of life – by definition grief, which programed into our being – is leading us back to life and meant to save us in the here and now.

In the words of Walter Bruggemann, "Salvation in the Old Testament rhetoric is often said to be 'material' – [meaning that it] is concerned with lived concrete, sociopolitical issues. Such a claim is made for the Old Testament, however, in response to frequent Christian claims that salvation is something spiritual and otherworldly. In reality, the Old Testament knows no such dualism as material-spiritual, and regards every aspect of life – personal and public, present and future – as open to YHWH's saving capacity. This 'salvation' is deliverance from any and every circumstance or any negative power that prevents full, joyous, communal existence" (Reverberations of Faith, Bruggemann, p. 185).

Far from focusing on the final destruction of the earth, the book of Revelation lets us know today that in death, our loved ones have salvation and the reality of the eternal on a full-time basis. Through God's nature as expressed in the love letter of I John, it is also a message meant to help us get through earth shattering realities like the death of a loved one, the end of a marriage, trauma, and other great brokenness and loss within the human family.

There has been a growing stream of theological reflection in the past few years reviving interest in the work of witnesses to the human depravity expressed through warfare and weaponry in the modern era and beyond, starting with World War One, the war to end all wars, and (unfortunately) beyond. I mentioned one of them earlier, the Reverend George MacLeod who restored the abbey and initiated the modern day Iona community as his response to being in the trenches; another was Jesuit priest Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. Teilhard, as he is most often referred to, was a paleontologist and geologist, that is to say he was both a priest and a scientist. He came to understand and wrote about what he referred to as "the evolutionary development of the material and the spiritual" and believed "all matter is infused with Divine Presence." The Catholic Church, and perhaps more painful for Teilhard, the Jesuit order, did not allow his work to be discussed or published; we have it today because his close friends convinced him to leave his books and journals to them so they could be published after his death.

Teilhard had much to say about the salvation of humanity and the earth, including this:

The masters of the spiritual life incessantly repeat that God wants only souls. To give those words their true value, we must not forget that the human soul, however independently created our philosophy represents it as being, is inseparable, in its birth and in its growth, from the universe into which it is born. *In each soul, God loves and partly saves the whole world* (emphasis mine) which that soul sums up in an incommunicable and particular way. But this summing-up, this welding, are not given to us ready-made and complete with the first awakening of

consciousness. It is we who, through our own activity, must industriously assemble the widely scattered elements (Teilhard, *The Divine Milieu*, p. 60).

I think we already know this to be true – because every ‘I love you,’ is a little bit of redemption and the loss of ‘I love you,’ feels like the end of the world. Sadly, the culture in which we live has many standards of success and failure; without conscious effort, a person’s life and energy can be spent on vaporous dreams but that is not the same as collecting the elements of a meaningful life and living redemption.

We will name the saints of this church gone from our view from this past year and many of us have other recent or deeply meaningful deaths on our minds today including our dear Teddy. As I think of the many memorial and funeral services I have been a part of or attended, I believe the most cherished legacies are the times when friends and family laughed together over the private jokes and funny nicknames; occasions when both good deeds and faux pas helped a stranger or lead to deeper friendships; the enjoyment of hobbies like reading, the creative arts, travel, or fishing; special times between grandparents and grandchildren; having a meaningful vocation whether that be marriage, parenting, volunteerism or as a career and involvement with the communal life of the church and mission. It’s been said that life is what happens while we are making other plans; it is only with conscious effort we can both nurture our souls and connect soul to soul as in the Body of Christ.

Our God is a God of “transformative power of immense proportion,” which means we are in intimate relationship with the wildness of God; through this wildness we might feel the nearness of a loved one gone or it may seem they are at the far end of Eternity. When referring to the Irish landscape, O’Donohue says, “I often think that the forms of the limestone are so abstract and aesthetic, and it is as if they were all laid down by some wild, surrealistic kind of deity. like a huge, wild invitation to extend your imagination” (Interview with Krista Tippet). And perhaps here is a meeting point of the voices, from John of the Letters to John of Patmos, to John O’Donohue, and Teilhard’s revolutionary theology – imagination; God imagining a world of love and joyous communal experience and the ways we imagine ourselves living into God’s plan and dying into God’s plan, and then living again, just as God planned.

We live and move and have our being within this wildly transformative God who is always calling us to life, to ride the wild edge of sorrow to new life, to choose life until our bodies are broken, diseased or worn out the Life Eternal chooses us.

I had the impulse a few weeks ago while standing on the shore of the Gulf of Mexico, to commune with Mother Earth; I was watching the big clouds and the big waves – firmly on the sand at moment and in the next, having it wash away from under my feet, when I heard the words, “I will always be here for you.” And I wondered if I was hearing creation or the Creator, when I heard again, “I will always be here for you and even at the end, I will cradle you forever.” Revelation and salvation; for all of us, that is what is real and eternal; what more could anyone ask? Thanks be to God. Amen.