

“Where are you?”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
All Saints Sunday — November 1, 2020

1 John 3:1-3 and Revelation 7:9-17

by Rev. Patrick D. Heery

About a week ago, my wife Jenna posted to Facebook a photo of our two-year-old son, Emerson, hiding behind a pillow. Maybe you saw it. He’s sitting on our couch, holding a small pillow in front of his face, which he believes has rendered him invisible, despite the tuft of curly black hair poking out at the top and completely exposed spindly legs that culminate in Oz-like ruby red socks. Apparently, toddlers are like ostriches: they think that if they can’t see you, you can’t see them. We, of course, play along, crying dramatically, “Where’s Emmy? I can’t find Emmy!” To which he shouts, “Right here! I’m right here!” while giggling behind the pillow.

Let’s just say the kid won’t be winning any hide-and-seek awards, but he sure is racking up points in the cuteness category.

If I could, I’d wise up, and I’d hold on to that moment of Emerson giggling behind a pillow. I’d stay there, in the glee and surprise of a little boy smiling ear to ear as he pulls the pillow away in his big reveal. I’d stay there, in that perfect speck of existence in which I know exactly where he is, and he knows exactly where I am. Because, as times goes on, we—like all children and parents—become harder to find.

In part, it is what brings us here today. We want to know: Where are the ones we love, who have passed beyond this mortal coil?

“Where are you?” we whisper in the early morning.

None of us of course knows the answer. We have beliefs: heaven, reincarnation, angels, ghosts, or just the soft earth in which they are buried. But we do not know. Death is the one true mystery, one we’d all love to solve—but you know, not personally.

For a time, we are content with mystery. Why bother with a question we can’t answer, when there is so much living to do? Scripture itself would seem to echo these sentiments. The Hebrew Scriptures avoid the question almost entirely. Jesus speaks of resurrection to eternal life. But of course—enigmatic as usual—he offers few specifics (thanks a lot, Jesus!). The epistles aren’t a whole lot more help; they too speak of resurrection and the day of consummation, when heaven and earth are united, and suffering comes to an end, and we are with God. But their language is poetic, and vague, and sometimes contradictory, resolving in the words we heard today from 1 John: “What we will be has not yet been revealed.”

That’s all fine, until it isn’t—until someone really close to us dies, or we ourselves face mortality. Suddenly, “Where are you?” becomes a personal and urgent question.

We wonder for a time if comfort might be had in the reasoning of philosophers, who remind us of the basic law of physics: energy cannot be created or destroyed, only transformed. Thus, something of us must live on. After death, we return to the cosmos, as energy, as spirit, our mortal distinctions stripped away, until we merge with the Infinite, the One from whom we came. It's a lovely and reasonable image.

But it is not enough.

We want more than energy, more than an idea. We want them. We want the way they stirred their tea—the way they laughed, or wrinkled their nose when they got angry. We want the smell of cookies baking in the kitchen, and the things they loved like buttons or old books. We want checkers out on the front lawn, and the way their hair shined in the sunlight. We want to feel their cheek against ours, as we sway to the music they loved. We want freckles, and fresh cut grass, and the Spanish steps in Rome, and ice-cold lemonade. We want it all—their thoughts, their memories, their bodies, all the little things only we knew about. We want to pull away a pillow, and see them there, smiling ear to ear.

We want to know that they—and we—persist in the essentialness of who we are, of whom God made us to be. All of us, together.

“Where are you?” we ask. And after a long pause, a small, still voice speaks from ancient and holy pages: “You’re asking the wrong question... It’s not ‘Where are you?’—It’s ‘Whose are you?’ ”

The prophets, and the apostles, and Jesus himself may say little about where we go after death, but they say a great deal about whose we are and to whom we belong.

1 John says, “We are God’s children.” In creation, God knelt in the dust and knit our bodies from the earth, and pressed his lips to ours, and breathed the gift of God’s life, God’s very image, till our lungs filled and we opened our eyes in wonder. Taken poetically or literally, the message is the same: we belong to God. In the words of Jeremiah, God says, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart” (1:5). Paul says, “In him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). “We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s” (Rom. 14:7-8).

The God to whom we belong is Love (1 John 4:8). It is a perfect love, wise and good. Perhaps that is all we need to know. The where, and the how, and the what, may all be a mystery, but we can trust that where we go is love, and how we go is love, and what we become is love.

God has them, our parents, our siblings, our spouses, our children, our friends. God has them all. And God will do whatever is best for them, as any parent would. I don’t presume to know what is best. But I trust that whatever is best, whatever is most pleasing and beautiful and good and loving, that is what God will do—because that is God’s nature.

“Is there anyone among you,” asks Jesus, “who if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? If you then, who are sinful, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things!” (Matt. 7:9-11).

That’s all we need to know.

When a baby is still in its mother’s womb, it thinks this is life. This womb—and its safety, its comfort—is the boundary of existence. Then, a light appears, and the child is brought out, crying, into a strange, new world. It’s cold and scary at first. The child might be tempted to think this is the end. But then the baby opens its eyes and sees her: the one who had given it life, the one who had always been there but unseen and unknown. Mommy. Over the years, the child realizes that life in the womb, as necessary and beautiful as it was, was just a foretaste of what life could be.

Perhaps, in dying, we go through a similar transition. We pass from this womb, which we thought was life, into heaven, the fullness of life. We see the One who had always been there, unseen and unknown.

And there, God will call you by name, will wipe away every tear, and death will be no more.

We do not need to understand it. We need only trust that we will be with our Mother, our God.

We don’t have to wait. The gospel is clear. We are with our Mother now. 1 John says, “We are God’s children *now*.” The love of God, and the love of the saints in heaven, goes with us. We walk with God, and we walk with them, not as the dead, but as the living. There is no strength of heart, nor breath of life, nor joy of love that isn’t mingled with them, born of them, in honor of them. Every time we read a story, every time we stand before a painting, every time we play and are silly, every time we speak or dream, they are there, because they belong to God, and we belong to God, and there is only God.

Where we are, when we are, even who we are, these can change. But whose we are, this does not change. And when whose you are is God’s, then where you are is exactly where you’re supposed to be. **Amen.**