

Isaiah 25:6-9

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear. ⁷ And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; ⁸ he will swallow up death forever. Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken. ⁹ It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.

Revelation 21:1-6

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ² And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; ⁴ he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away." ⁵ And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true." ⁶ Then he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life. (328)

I was in the boathouse the other day, small, crowded with boats on racks and on slings and on pulley systems in the rafters. I was wrapping up what would likely be my last morning on the water until next April. My rowing partner, Anne, and I were avoiding talking about what would soon be unavoidable to talk about: when we'd start back on the ergometers for "winter rowing."

Two other people were in the boathouse as well, one a young man I hadn't seen before. He was wearing a maroon sweatshirt, which I only glimpsed as Anne and I maneuvered her boat back into the rafters. When it was set in its proper place, I anchored the rope on its figure-eight thingy and noticed the lettering on the sweatshirt: "Phillips Exeter."

This is where I went to high school, where I learned to row. So, I asked him, "Did you go to Exeter?"

"Yeah," he said with what seemed callow pride.

"So did I," I told him, which deflated him a little. (Behold, your future! Ordinary middle age.)

"What class were you?" he asked.

"Class of '89. What about you?"

"2015," he said laughing, back on top of the conversation. (He would be different!)

“Is that where you learned to row?” I asked.

“No,” he said. “But everyone there kept asking me to. I did other sports.”

And that was the end of that.

Walking away, I said to Anne, *a woman even older than I am*, “Yes, that it is where I learned to row. Thanks for asking.”

She laughed. “They can’t see us,” she said. “They certainly can’t imagine we’d have anything to say.”

“I guess I get it,” I told her. After all, I’d just spent the week sifting through church files, this time the files of Church on the Hill, though following a summer with the files of the Monterey Church. And it’s unnerving to do it, to sift through the files—membership lists, annual reports and bylaws, notes of thanks and notes of confrontation, the colorful detritus of youth groups and Sunday school—the living record of an organization over two hundred fifty years old. To see all those people who’d carried it along, who labored for it and devoted themselves to it and in a few cases gave up on it:

And here you thought *you* were the linchpin of sustaining and success. Here you thought *you* were the one whose praises would ever be sung, Homeric odes to your capacity to preach a moving sermon or to send out a convincing stewardship letter or to facilitate a not-too-acrimonious cottage meeting. But no, you meet someone who came before, especially long before, now just a faded name typed onto thinning paper, and you realize you’re passing through too, you’re just as important and impressive as so many other important and impressive and inspiring people.

Today is All Saints’ Day.

Well, not really. Today is the day after All Souls’ Day, which is the day after All Saints’ Day, which are two of a three-day festival, a triduum also called the Days of the Dead. These include All Hallows Eve on October 31st, All Saints’ Day on November 1st, and All Souls’ Day on November 2nd.

So don’t believe the people who say that Halloween is against Christian practice.

That said, the way we do it these days seems in a different spirit than its original one. Really, the way we do it seems almost designed to aid in our avoiding that which the triduum would have us encounter.

Don’t get me wrong, I love Halloween as we do it. It’s one of very few holidays in the United States that nearly everyone seems to celebrate, or at least to feel welcome to celebrate. Not

sectarian, not political, it's just for fun, which we as a populace could definitely use more of. As we seem evermore at one another's throats, a day like Halloween could really serve good purpose, in its being so utterly frivolous, if sometimes scarily so. Zombies, ghouls, chainsaw murderers: oh my!

But this comic fear: turns out it can obscure the actually horrifying thing the festival was to encourage our encountering, our indeed holding in mind, an ordinary horror, one we all know though we all mostly put out of mind: that there will come a day when we will be gone, just like all those who came before us and whom we sometimes sort of think weren't as real as we are.

The first decade, though, of the new millennium brought forth an altogether opposite possibility. The 2000s had people at Google tinkering toward a revolution. The storage of data would become easy, inexpensive, and available to everyone with a computer and an internet connection. It would take up neither space nor raw materials except for those which generate the energy for sustaining storage. The Cloud made all those floppy discs and CD-ROMs and hard-drives seem like quaint relics from a ridiculous time—not to mention how irrelevant seemed now photo albums and scrapbooks and Libraries of Alexandria and Encyclopedias Britannica and the Smithsonian Museum. Obsolete. All obsolete!

But it has contributed to a saddening obsession, I think anyway, one that clashes with a tenant of classical Christianity, that in God all will be remembered and held in mind, in God all that is and was and ever shall be is as real and alive as ever it could be or has been. The timelessness of God, the eternality of God and the grandeur of God as consciousness and indeed as love does make it so all of reality, in all its parts and particles, shall be held in such loving memory as to be ever alive and having effect and affect.

But the temptation that we ourselves might have such power as to remember is great. That the doing of history, the tracing and recreating of it, once a scavenger hunt through the world's dust and detritus, a painstaking effort to find its illuminating bits so to tape them back together would be, starting now, so much easier by the Cloud and the search bar. Starting now, all of our treasures would be easily Googled!

Starting now but also working backward. Tobias spent the summer on an archeological dig in Turkey, wearing his hands thin of skin, destroying his favorite pair of sneakers, wheeling around barrows of pottery shards that might or might not be historically significant. How much better it shall be to have such things not only in museums where it's quiet and temperature-controlled, but better still catalogued on the internet where I can see them without having to leave my house, leave my chair!

Better yet more, by such means I too can catalogue my history, my every moment, so I shall never be forgotten, so I might even be mistaken for great in the eyes of history, so assiduously is my every sip of coffee recorded or my every walk down the any old street. I don't begrudge the selfie urge; I just find it symptomatic of a much sadder state than what vanity and egotism it's been credited to. Existential fear and the Instagram-enabled, happy-seeming torment of avoiding all that: "Here I am! Here I am again! It will almost accomplish that always shall I be!" the approach of the parabola to the line of the absolute, ever nearing, ever nearing, never quite getting there...

No, for we too will be gone, gone and largely forgotten.

Is it playing too close to type for me to say these are the sorts of worries church is so much better for addressing and managing? Is it too cliched a thing for me to use this pulpit to urge people to maybe give church a try? And not because our records are without their major holes, or, conversely, aren't glutted with way too many pieces of paper with way too much useless information, thus making useful information as likely to find as a precious shard of pottery in the vast sands of the Sahara, but because record-keeping is a secondary task to remembering that it is God who remembers, who regathers, who redeems; it is God, the imminent-eternal who holds all things in mind that nothing shall be forgotten or made dark in dreadful non-existence?

When the prophet Isaiah declared a mountaintop feast spread out for all peoples, this wasn't idle talk or fanciful tale-telling. There was an urgency here expressed. This comes to us from 2nd Isaiah, the middle portion of this three-part book of prophecy often accredited to one prophet. But the scholarly consensus is that this is three books by three prophets, each from one distinct time in the history of ancient Israel and Judah.

The first portion speaks to us from just prior to the exile, just prior to when Babylon would invade Judah and Jerusalem, would crush the city and destroy its surroundings, salt fields, tear down vineyards, burn the Temple down, setting fire to its mortar so to dismantle the monument stone by enormous stone, especially cruel in its time-taking toil, force the people into life amidst a foreign empire. Israel had already fallen. Now would fall Judah, in 586.

The second portion speaks to us from after the fall of Jerusalem, after the crushing of Judah, after the taking of the good people into exile and the abandonment of the old and the lame and the uselessly young to die amidst the rubble.

The third portion speaks from when return and rebuilding were beginning to seem possible, were beginning to take hold as hope-making promise.

This declaration of a feast set out for all peoples comes to us from 2nd Isaiah, from the time when things were at their worst, when the people were separated from one another, were evermore so alienated from other peoples. They were also well acquainted with the crisis of starvation, the torment of dehydration, the maw of history that can swallow up people amidst so much fallen waste and crushing rubble, swallowed as if they'd never even been, the earth itself little more than a mass grave.

And yet here we have an altogether different declaration. Here it is that all shall be gathered in, all shall be sated with plentiful food and ever-flowing wine of the sort that destroyed vineyards suggested would never be again, that all shall be sustained as the earth can only hardly sustain. Moreover, the shroud that is the menace of approaching annihilation shall itself be annihilated, while everything that has always but lived under its shadow shall be liberated of this low-hung roof that restricts growth to God, that limits where hope can be cast and stretched up and ever into.

The torment of time is that all things whose existence dwells within will come to an end and moreover that so many will be the things active in the world that most will be forgotten to the human mind. We promise we will never forget; we promise we will always remember. We promise this to those fallen to history's worst events, to the people who died as if a holocaust to the Lord, a holy offering to the eternal, but who more truly died as easily-offed sacrifices to the generating power of collective violence, generating a unified people like nothing else can: collective violence.

"Woe unto this generation," I think Jesus meant when he said, generation not as a cohort of people of a shared age, but generation as a way, a dynamic, of creating a cohort of people, by means of establishing a shared enemy, a cheap scapegoat. "Woe unto this way of generating unity."

And thus, we say we'll never forget; we promise we will always remember. But we won't. If we manage to (remember) when it comes to the great and terrible things of history, we definitely won't (remember) when it comes to the mundane, the ordinary.

Though history proves we'll likely forget its big lessons as well.

We will forget. Things will slip our minds. Or, as of late, our attempts to remember everything will result in heaps of data amidst which things will yet be lost. The Cloud has become a glutted, gloopy imitation of the grandeur of the divine mind, divine wisdom by which to make coherence and meaning of it all.

We will forget.

We will be forgotten.

But for God.

But for God.

Have you ever noticed how Christianity begins in “But...” The first word of the resurrection story in the gospel narratives, “But on the first day at early dawn...” is where Christianity begins for everything beginning again. We thought it was finished, but... We thought it was all over, said and done, but... We thought the world was contained, if also tragic. We thought it was predictable if also disappointing (death and taxes, the two sure things), but...

Nativity, call it, as Hannah Arendt did. Rhymes with fatality, but new birth, ever new possibility, ever the possibility of being surprised. Nativity. But...

It is my experience that the terror of being forgotten as I consider history rolling on without me, long after I'm gone, is made quite a bit less potent when I remember God remembering me, remembering all that I've loved and made and done and marveled at and been stupid about. Our attempts at creating a record of all that's come before: this may be God-blessed. But it is feeble, blessedly feeble. Because, good news:: it doesn't come down to each of our capacity to remember, to hold in mind. It doesn't come down to how well insulated our museums are or how secure our internet connection is. None of these will secure us from the terrible insistence of time, the gracious movement of time, its ever presenting a new possibility, a new possibility, and its quiet promise to bring all things to fullness of being, that absolute line that we creep closer to but only truly join by God's creative action, that miracle that brings us from creeping time to gracious eternity.

Who has come before you in this life of God's sustaining? Who has come before you in this life of faith? Who do you remember, and who do you imagine you forget, and what consolation might there be for the forgotten?

Consider them now. Those ghostly faces from your packed away photo albums. Those names on gravestones out the window, up the street. Hold them in mind, but fear not letting them go. God is the all-in-all, the one by whom the saints remembered and the saints forgotten live on, sing praise, and light our way, until such time as we are the saints serving those who come next.

Thanks be to God.