

A Mystery
I Corinthians 15.51-58
All Saints' Day
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Today's task is naming the ones we have lost and remembering them as an act of worship, and I wish you could tell me their stories right now. We could pass the microphone around and share the tales of the beloved friend, the grandmother, the pioneer, the precious mother, the life-of-the-party, the dedicated co-worker. You could tell me the stories of the losses you carry but haven't named out loud; the stories of the ones who held your own stories in a way no one else ever can. We could let their stories be our sermon.

They are with us, aren't they? Not just their stories, but their presence. We carry them with us, and we need to remember them out loud. We name what we have lost and are somehow strengthened and renewed by that act. There are some who do not wish to speak of death. It is considered a private affair, and we are told there is no need to dwell on such things. People are praised for having a brave face, never complaining, moving on. We only say these things because we haven't always talked about loss and death well in our culture. Too often, we do not know how to trust each other with those matters of the heart.

And so, I have been surprised by the conversations I am having about light and dark, good and evil, life and death with my son in recent months as we have been reading the Harry Potter series together. I've just finished reading Year 5: The Order of the Phoenix, and Turner is about half-way through the 750 page story. If you're not familiar with the series, I'll summarize very generally and quickly by saying Harry's life is marked by death. We say something like this in our Ash Wednesday observances, don't we? From ashes you come, to ashes you shall return.

Quite literally Harry bears a scar on his forehead from the time an evil wizard attempted to kill him as a baby. Yet his life is also marked, invisibly and powerfully, by love because it was the love of his mother's sacrifice on that day that saved him. Years after his parents' death, Harry discovers he has a godfather and quickly loves the man, Sirius Black, with a fierce loyalty because he is the closest thing to a father and real family that Harry has ever known.

As the story arc of the seven books curves, Sirius Black dies in the process of fighting the forces of darkness alongside Harry. Located deep within a building where the most magical secrets are held, Sirius is knocked into a room with a long curtain. As Harry watches on, Sirius falls through an ancient doorway and disappears behind a veil, which flutters for a moment as though in a high wind and then falls back into place.¹

Later, Harry discusses this loss with his friend Luna who also lost her mother, and she explains that she is comforted knowing she'll see her mother again because she's simply behind the veil. Harry is confused and surprised, then Luna asks, "You heard them just beyond the veil, right?" And Harry admits that he was certain he had heard people talking on the other side of the curtain just as Sirius disappeared. Life and death separated by this mysterious, dark curtain.

It's an image not entirely unfamiliar to scripture. Though the veil we know from the Hebrew scriptures was the protective one "in the synagogue and temple, where it protected the sanctity of the ark of the covenant and holy of holies from common view."² Even the high priest was not to casually slip beyond the veil but only carefully, ritually would he enter into that space. The veil protected humanity from the powerful presence of God.

And many of you know the Celts got at this idea with their description of thin places. Though these are places to be observed and named, not feared or guarded against. "Heaven and earth, the Celtic saying goes, are only three feet apart, but in thin places that distance is even shorter."³

"Listen, I will tell you a mystery," writes Paul. There is a world beyond. There is a presence so near that sometimes we imagine we can simply reach out and draw back a curtain to see what we already sense.

In today's text, Paul writes to the Corinthian church, "[L]et me tell you something wonderful, a mystery I'll probably never fully understand."⁴ And he delves into curious descriptions of the end of all things. A trumpet's blast, everyone changed, everything changed. We could get sidetracked by his words; lost arguing and debating what he

¹ Description adapted from *Harry Potter and The Order of the Phoenix*

² *The Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, "veil", p. 911

³ http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/11/travel/thin-places-where-we-are-jolted-out-of-old-ways-of-seeing-the-world.html?_r=0

⁴ Philippians 15:51 from *The Message*

meant, including nuance and metaphor and methods of interpretation. And all of that reminds me of one of my very favorite stories to tell about Dub. If you have heard me tell this one already, well, that's what we do with the best stories of the ones we have lost, right? You'll likely hear me tell it again.

My friend, Dr. W. T. Edwards, is on the list of names we read today. I knew him first as professor of New Testament at Samford University but quickly came to trust him as a friend. Nathan and I were often invited for meals around the kitchen table at Dub and Peg's house. I remember Saturday morning pancakes more than evening meals, and I keep their pancake recipe inside the spice cabinet to use as our family go-to. He died in April, and friends from far and near gathered in Birmingham at Samford's Reid Chapel to remember Dub. I can't recall a memorial service with more laughter or deliberate cursing. In the days surrounding his death, friends and former students, many of whom are now pastors, shared their favorite "Dub-isms", of which there are many. And my favorite came in the early minutes of one of his classes on the Apostle Paul. Peg wasn't a fan of Paul and said something like, "Dub can have Paul, I just want Jesus."

One day, before Dub was to teach us about wrestling with passages that we don't like or that don't make sense, two preacher boys were arguing. The preacher boys were the young undergraduate fellows who had already been pastoring churches for a few years, and they were arguing about premillennial vs postmillennial dispensationalism. I forget the details of what these two young men were debating. Generally speaking, they were trying to determine if Jesus would literally and physically return to earth to rule over all things for 1000 years. If that literal reign isn't to happen, then the other argued that the introduction of Jesus' rule (ushering in the kingdom of God) was marked by Jesus' life and ministry some 2000 years ago.

They went back and forth as class should have started then realized they were the only two speaking. They turned to Dr. Edwards and asked, "Well, what do you think?" To which he replied, "Boys, I'm what you call a Pan-millennialist." They scratched their heads, certain they'd not heard this term before and stumped to figure out what he meant. He giggled a little with a familiar gleam in his eyes and said, "Yes, I'm a Pan-millennialist. That means this is all gonna pan out however God wants it to pan out, and we don't need to be too worried about it. Now let's start class."

After giving his best effort to describing the mystery of life after death, the Apostle Paul ends up in the same place as Dub Edwards, though I'm sure Paul had a hand in Dub's conclusions. Paul is responding to questions and stories in his letters that we can only surmise. And here he addresses questions of God's timing, God's plan, human death, resurrection, and eternal life. What happens? Are we immediately transported to the

side of God? Do we fall asleep to be awakened together one day? Do we get resurrected bodies like Jesus? Do we become spirit—the essence of who we once were?

Paul describes what he understands of God's mysterious work, but then he tells his friends that life now is to be shaped by our hope for the mystery to come. Whatever happens, however things pan out, whatever God's mysterious plan is for us all, we are to be focused in this life before us today. No fear. No guilt. Just confidence that God is at work here just as God will be at work then. So our focus, brothers and sisters, is on the place God has called us today. What do you most love to do and what does the world most desperately need to experience? Find out where those two intersect, and give your life to God's kingdom work today, now, here. Let nothing hold you back, Paul writes.

That's not to say we don't wonder, that we don't long for those who have passed. We are right to name and remember the ones we love so deeply and fiercely, the ones we wish could draw near but who are hidden across the thin place, behind the veil, mysteriously in the palm of God's hand. When we recall their saintly ways, however, we must become inspired. We remember the gleam in the eye and the challenge from the dear one to worry less and trust God more. We recount the deep belly laugh, the great story-teller, and the way we felt when we were pulled into his embrace. We recall her willingness to push back against tradition and be true to her calling. We give thanks for their collective wisdom to know the tradition had to be released in order to be part of God's work. We find that spot of light, hear that familiar tune, catch a scent, sense a closeness and everything washes over us. We carry this with us into the work of our days. The inspiration, the memories, the sense that God is mysteriously drawing all things back together in God's way and in God's time. We give our lives to that hope.

Today we continue our remembering at the table. In just a moment you will be invited to participate in this great meal of naming, story sharing, and honoring. After you have knelt, received, prayed, reflected, then you are invited to walk over to the memorial candle and add another name to the collection. Whose life inspires the work of your days? Whose legacy lives on in your actions? For whom do you give thanks? May our remembering today be an act of worship as we give ourselves anew to the work of God.