

Seeing Christ Through the Glow

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
November 4, 2018—All Saints Sunday

- Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 Good News Translation ⁴ He sets the time for sorrow and the time for joy, the time for mourning and the time for dancing....
- Hebrews 12:1-2 New Revised Standard Version ¹ Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, ² looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: The example of dear ones who preceded us in death continues to light our way as we seek to be faithful disciples.

Martin B. Copenhaver is senior pastor of Wellesley Congregational Church in Massachusetts. He thought it was going to be an ordinary day, until he came into the kitchen one summer morning. Here's what happened.

"Shady is dead," my wife Karen said to me, with more concern than grief in her voice. I knew the source of her concern well enough. Shady had lived in a tank in our den for a year and-a-half, as close to family as a frog can be.

How do we break the news to our daughter Alanna, just five years old at the time, who referred to herself as the frog's "master," who gave Shady her name, and even informed us that Shady was a girl ("because there's some way to tell," she had said)?

When Alanna woke up I told her, "I have some sad news. Shady died." Alanna immediately responded, "How can you tell?" I had to suppress a smile because, in truth, the frog was the picture of death, lying belly-up with her webbed "hands" positioned as if to hold a lily. I said, "Come downstairs and see."

Alanna stared at Shady for a long time and said, "She's dead," then added matter-of-factly, "We should bury her."

Alanna knew the very spot to bury her. When the hole was deep enough, I slid Shady's body into the ground and we covered her with a blanket of earth.

"Let's sing a song," Alanna said. I asked if she had any suggestions. "Let's sing 'Silent Night.'" With the rain beginning to fall around us, seeming to water the seed we had planted in the earth, we sang a homely duet. Then Alanna said a prayer: "Dear God, thank you for Shady, who was a great frog. We hope she is all right. Please take care of her. Amen." We placed a couple of evergreen boughs on the grave and then went inside for breakfast.

I suppose it is handy to have a minister in the family when a frog needs a funeral, but in this case I was more member of the congregation than officiant. And I was struck by how wonderful it is to be part of a family, the church, that shows us from the earliest age how to respond to the awesome presence of death.¹

¹ Martin B. Copenhaver, "A Funeral for a Frog" in *StillSpeaking Daily Devotional* at ucc.org, August 18, 2017

Yes, the family of the church is a treasure because the church is one of the few places in your life where you can talk about how the death of someone dear has affected you, and you won't be hushed by someone thinking that the subject is inappropriate. After all, we are gathered to worship the God of Heaven and Earth who created life. God knew death would be a necessary component of life to give our finite lives infinite value. Our Heavenly Father even knew first-hand the preciousness of life because Jesus the Son was crucified, died and was buried. But the cross – the instrument of Christ's death – was rendered powerless when God raised Jesus from death to life. That gift of new life awaits all who seek to serve God's will by following the way of Jesus.

So the cross that was a symbol of death to the ancients is now an inspiration to we who believe because it's empty – it inspires us as a symbol of eternal life.

You never know where inspiration will come from.

On World Communion Sunday last month, sixth-grader Beatrix Stickney was right where you are now, sitting in a pew, taking part in the communion service. While the elders finished serving the rest of the congregation Beatrix took her communion cup and placed it in the holder on the pew in front of her. That's when she noticed that the surface of the grape juice was casting onto the pew a reflection of the light from the chandelier overhead. She got her mother Melissa to take a quick photo to capture the phenomenon – the photo on the cover of today's bulletin. Why did Beatrix want a photo? When she emailed the photo to me later that day, Melissa explained, "She thought that was pretty symbolic."

I'm not sure what specific symbolism Beatrix saw – I haven't had the chance to ask her. Maybe we would see the same symbolism Beatrix did... or maybe the reflection of light by the juice in a communion cup might suggest something different to each of us. For instance, maybe the reflection suggests:

- Jesus is the light of the world; or
- Sometimes we don't see the light of God's presence directly, but we see it reflected in the words and deeds of others; or
- In communion's symbols of bread and cup we remember the servant body and the precious blood of Jesus our Savior; or
- As St. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians Chapter 13, "Now we see in a mirror dimly, but then we shall see face to face."

This morning we have added more symbols to our experience of worship.

This array of candles is more than merely symbolic, of course. This collection is adding one-hundred candlepower or more of light to the sanctuary. Trust me, it adds warmth when you're up here in the chancel. And I think we'd agree that it adds beauty to our experience of worship.

A candle, in its own way, is a living thing. Its flame is "alive", reacting to every invisible, subtle puff of breeze as it dances back and forth, stretching high and dipping low. The flame feeds off the wick, slowly reducing the candle's stature as the flame vaporizes the molten wax. This static display is dynamic. This "still life" is alive.

But this display also holds meaning because of the symbolism we have given it. Each candle represents one or more people who, in life, were quite precious to someone. Those persons offered love and were loved in return. They were life's companions. They were sources of protection and comfort. They were the embodiment of hospitality, perhaps, or generosity, or compassion, or encouragement, or faithfulness. They were parents or grandparents, spouses or siblings, children or grandchildren. Perhaps they were classmates, co-workers, mentors, coaches. They were people, children of God, beloved and appreciated, and now they are missed.

Their worth in our lives far, far exceeds even the most expensive or elaborate candle we could possibly produce. But here we are, asking cylinders of wax to stand for the ones we loved and admired. Each candle is but a symbol of the imprint that person made on our lives.

For me, this assemblage of light brings to mind the image we heard this morning from the beginning of Hebrews Chapter 12. In the preceding chapter the biblical author had been describing person after person in the biblical narrative who exemplified faithful trust in God: from Adam and Eve's son Abel, to Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Jacob, Moses and Rahab, Samson, David, Samuel and many more. Then in Chapter 12, referring to all those examples of faithful servants of God, the author says, "...we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses...."²

This array of candles is a visual reminder that we are, indeed, surrounded by "so great a cloud of witnesses" whose lives, whose love, whose sacrifices, whose courage all paved the way for us. Because of their example in our lives, because of their influence on us, we are able to assert, "Yes, I serve the Lord our God by seeking to follow the way of Jesus the Son of God." In the same way that we view the communion table through the light of these memorial candles, we see ourselves as Christ's disciples through the example of those we remember this morning who are, indeed, part of "so great a cloud of witnesses" surrounding and supporting us even today.

The familiar verses from the biblical book called "Ecclesiastes" offer a dose of reality. They remind us that the richness of life includes highs and lows, ebbs and flows. Ecclesiastes asserts that God has provided times when we will know sorrow, but other times when we will know joy. In the grand scheme of God's creation there are times appropriate for somber mourning and other times where we can't help but dance in jubilation. In fact, sometimes those experiences overlap. I'll bet that you've probably been part of such times: think of a time you've attended calling hours at a funeral home. Have you ever noticed that at those gatherings, the muted conversations around the room will be interrupted from time to time by an outburst of laughter brought on by memories of times shared with the deceased? There are times for sorrow and times for joy, and sometimes those times are intertwined.

So it is this morning as God gathers us for worship on this day for remembrance of the dear ones in our lives who we've lost to death. We honor the significance of our loss with a lighted candle and a silent embrace of our precious memories. But we offer praise to the God of Life and Death by looking beyond our personal loss. We look at these candles symbolizing our loved ones. Through the light of these dear ones we see God's abiding gift of love embodied in Jesus the Son, our Master and Savior. The ones we loved, the ones we remember continue to be a light in our lives showing us the way.

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² from Hebrews 12:1 New Revised Standard Version