

Faith Mennonite Church  
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**“Invisible, as Music; but positive, as Sound’: Hearing the Gospel as Good News”**

*A sermon for All Saints Day 2015*

(Scripture readings: Isaiah 25:6-9; Revelation 21:1-6a; John 11:32-44)

Good morning, friends; I open this morning with lines from the poet Emily Dickinson that with her imagery and exacting poetic brevity characterize that reality to which our scriptural readings finally point:

This World is not Conclusion.  
A Species stands beyond—  
Invisible, as Music—  
But positive, as Sound—  
It beckons, and it baffles—  
Philosophy—don’t know—  
And through a Riddle, at the last—  
Sagacity, must go—  
To guess it, puzzles scholars—  
To gain it, Men have borne  
Contempt of Generations  
And Crucifixion, shown—  
Faith slips—and laughs, and rallies—  
Blushes, if any see—  
Plucks at a twig of Evidence—  
And asks a Vane, the way—  
Much Gesture, from the Pulpit—  
Strong Hallelujahs roll—  
Narcotics cannot still the Tooth  
That nibbles at the soul—

The Bible speaks of a God who is *for us*. The sum of the Gospel is the announcement of the good news that God looks upon God’s creation and in the person and work of Jesus Christ says, “Yes, I love you. It is *you* that I love.” God says “Yes!” not only to human life, but “Yes!” to the whole of creation, the whole *cosmos*. Included in God’s “Yes!” to God’s creation is God’s “No!” to the powers of Sin and Death, all powers that seek to kill and destroy, to oppress, all powers that make life unlivable; all death-dealing powers that de-humanize, that threaten to turn the earth into a hell. In other words, God’s “Yes!” to the world in Jesus Christ is spoken not to an *ideal* world, but to *this* broken world; and it is precisely *this* world that God so loves as to breathe forth *new life*; it is into *this* world that God comes to “make all things new.”

In our scripture passages for today the Bible speaks unreservedly and directly to the character and shape of God’s “Yes!” as that power and that reality which brings forth *new life* from the dead. Our passages for today are about the *presence* and *reality* of a God whose “Yes!” for us means nothing less than radical *hope*—a hope *beyond* hope—a hope that one day “death will be swallowed up” by the forthcoming of the glory of heaven, and on that day “all things will be made new.” The Old Testament text from Isaiah expresses something of this Gospel hope: “the Lord of hosts will make for *all* peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.” Included in this hope is that God will “destroy the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever.” Is this not something of what the author of Revelation speaks: the coming of “a new heaven and a new earth?” Oh, Lord, how *much* longer, we ask and we plead! Lord, thy kingdom come!

Such hope is *not* grounded in our ordinary experience. Does it not appear to us as a kind of *contradiction*? Paul speaks of this hope as a hope in that which is *unseen*, a hope in what is, properly speaking or at least empirically speaking, not possible. It is, we might say, a hope that comes to us from *the other side* of

history—a hope that comes *from* heaven *to* the earth. A hope that does not take its bearing from *within* the coordinates of *this* world; a hope that is grounded *not* in what is humanly possible, but what is possible only by the boundless love and grace of the God made known to us in Jesus Christ.

Life from the dead? “[Jesus] cried with a loud voice, ‘Lazarus, come out!’ The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, ‘Unbind him, and let him go’” (John 11:43-44). What a strange scene—a haunting scene, even a ghostly scene on this day after Halloween. A dead man walking? Wrapped in strips of cloth? When I was a kid I would sometimes get into fights with the bigger kids in the neighborhood. Not really intentionally, but somehow I would figure out ways to get on the nerves of kids that were a few years older and much bigger than me. When they would try to “teach me a lesson,” I would respond by *morphing* into a mummy. As a mummy, I was *unstoppable*, nobody could hurt me (“Mummy, mummy!,” I would cry). I was a dead man walking. It was silly; and, of course, a psycho-therapist might have some things to say about it; but, for me, it was a kind of defense mechanism I think. Even when you beat me down, I will get back up. I will fight. Of course, this is not quite like the story of Lazarus: for the raising of Lazarus points us not to a mechanism of defense *against* being beat down, but to the power of God’s life-giving grace and the reality of a God who creates life *out of nothing*. And in John’s narrative this is the climax of Jesus’ earthly ministry—and it is what finally leads the authorities to plot against him. Notice: the most powerful life-giving act imaginable is what brings Jesus to his death.

Perhaps the raising of Lazarus is something of a *sign* of things to come. Remember, many Jews in Jesus’ time believed that the end time, the kingdom of God would mean the *resurrection of the dead*. In this story, Jesus demonstrates the power of the *end time* radically breaking into the *present* by bringing forth life, even life from the dead. The raising of Lazarus is a *sign* of the presence and reality of the reign of God, the forthcoming of a heavenly power, of a love and a life so strong, of a “Yes!” so wide and so deep, that even the power and finality of Death cannot overcome it. Yet, I think we must go further, we must go on to say that *even* the raising of Lazarus does not finally or fully express the radicality of the hope of the Gospel. It is still, we might say, nothing but a *parable* of what is to come. For the Gospel hope for *resurrection* is not merely the resuscitation of a corpse. The Gospel hope for *resurrection* infinitely *exceeds* even the raising of Lazarus.

Hear the Gospel: God’s “Yes!” *for all peoples*; God’s “Yes!, I love you; it is *you* that I love”— though you despair over the world, there is Good News—hope is on the way, the power of Death and mourning do not have the last word. No, the irrepressible *life* of the God who raised Jesus from the dead *triumphs* over the power of Death; the boundless *love* of the God who raised Jesus from the dead cannot be contained and will not be *determined* by the death-dealing powers of nation-states and militaries, policing and prisons, for this is the one who says: “See, I make all things new!” The hope of the Gospel is not that we will live on for eternity—it is rather hope in the *promise*—of which the raising of Lazarus is but merely a *sign*, a *parable*—of a future of grace that comes to us *out of nothing*, a future that comes to us *not* determined by the past nor contained by the power of Death, a future in which “death is swallowed up” by the boundless power of the love of God. Jesus is Victor! Rejoice!

God’s triumph over Death happens in the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Yet, the contradiction remains—we feel it in our bones. Is there any hope? Is this a lie? We worry, we doubt, we rationalize, we know what is impossible and possible in this world, we calculate, we plan, we despair, and in this midst of all of this God says unreservedly: “Yes!, I love *you*. Not just the believing part, not just the hopeful part of you, not even just the good and faithful parts of you, but *you* in all of your faithlessness, in all of your despair, in all your weakness.” God says, “Yes!” and this yes means *life* and *hope* and *love*. To be sure, the God of the resurrection is not a God that stands *above* this world in power and glory. The God of the resurrection is the God of the Crucified Nazarene, the one who preached Good News to the poor, the one who undergoes suffering and death, the one who is always *with us* and *for us* in *our* suffering, who is always *with us* and *for us* in our greatest despair, who is always *with us* and *for us* in our mourning and loss, through all of life’s ups and downs, and whose love enters into even the deepest hell, those experiences of God-abandonment—and it is into these spaces of hell that God is at work to liberate, to make all things new, to bring forth new life from the dead—to create *out of nothing*. It is into these spaces of emptiness that the God of life, the God of creation and resurrection, says to all: “Yes!, I love you; it is *you* that I love.” Rejoice, the Lord is victorious over the power of Death! Lord, may we come to experience more fully, by your Holy Spirit, the reality of that life and that love which stands beyond this world: “Invisible, as Music, but positive, as Sound.”