

A DAWN IN EVERY DARKNESS
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All Saints Day
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

John 1

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

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We are in an extraordinary season of death and dying. Our parish has been touched by death more frequently this year than most. Sallye Price, Harriet Arthur, Ada Hatchett, Harvey Kercheval, Wann Martin and Mary Ann Zimmerman. Several of our fellow parishioners are facing their final days. Tracy Boyer is and after the service today a few of us will share communion with him and Grace in their home.

Everybody dies. So, as I sometimes say, don't take it personally. Easy for me to say. But when it happens to one you love it's hard not to take it personally. It stings. It hurts. In some cases it nearly kills those who are left behind.

Lately I have had to conduct quite a few memorial services. A memorial service is not only a time to remember the life that has passed; it's also a time to remember the lives of those left behind who often flounder in a state of despair. We can't resuscitate the deceased; but sometimes we can breathe life into dispirited survivors. At least, that is my hope when I conduct a memorial service.

After one of those recent services, I was told by several different people that I have a reputation for putting the "fun" back in funerals. I think I know what they mean but I must say I take it with a grain of salt. I don't aim for fun. But I certainly do try to weave joy and hope into memorial services.

In some cases joy and hope are more difficult if not impossible. After all, not all deaths are equal. It's one thing when a person has lived a full life like Sallye or Harvey. It's something entirely different when that person is young. Such deaths are tragic. Even then I try my best not to be overly somber or overly funereal.

I've attended a few funeral services in my time. I know how grim and impersonal a service can be. I know how preachers can harangue a congregation with threats of hell or drone on and on with endless readings and prayers boring people to tears and making them wish they were dead. I know how a service can gloss over a person's complex and troubled life with sheer adulation leaving people with a false and unsatisfying portrait.

Years ago, the late Henry Morrow told me how he and his good friend Bill White once attended a funeral service for one of Shepherdstown's notoriously unsavory characters. The deceased had no church affiliation so the funeral home hired a pastor for the occasion. The pastor knew nothing about the deceased and yet waxed long and

eloquently about what a great person he had been. At the conclusion of the service Henry turned to Bill and said: *if I die first, get that preacher for me.*

Sometimes it's hard to say a good word about a person. At another funeral of another unsavory character one minister could manage only one compliment: *well, you know, his brother was worse.*

Years ago as a young pastor I determined to create the kind of memorial service that celebrates a person's life without, if possible, glossing over the dark side of the person or the circumstances of death. You see, my role is different from the family and friends who rightfully stand up to sing praises and offer accolades. My role as a minister of the gospel is to allow a particular life to express the gospel, namely, that life is hard, but grace abounds.

Life is hard for everyone. And it's hard in different ways. But it's also true that grace finds each of us time and time again, lifts us up, mends our bodies and hearts, and gently nudges us back into our world. It's my duty and privilege at such public occasions to speak the truth, not in a blunt and raw way, but in love. Love should temper all truth telling.

When a person in our parish dies I spend time with their family and friends listening to remembrances, comparing their mental snapshots with mine. Inevitably I hear about struggles and dark times but I also hear of light and grace. I listen for tales of redemption because I believe the light of Christ enlightens every soul in one way or another, at one time or another.

And that's why I can stand here and say such things as: Harvey Kercheval was a rock. It took two men to lift what he lifted by himself. He built a house, a barn, a shed and an entire silo by himself.

Harvey was a rock. But Harvey also had a tender heart. He was a rock you could lean on.

Harvey had been through enough himself to know life can be hard. He'd been through enough to know we all need a break. He'd been through enough to know that it's grace, not judgment, that leads us safely home. He'd been lost and broken more than once but grace found him time and time again and lifted him up.

Maybe that's why Harvey, a restorer of antiques, could look at a dilapidated, broken down chair, or at a life coming unraveled and not feel hopeless or judgmental. That was Harvey.

I believe the light of Christ enlightens every soul and that's why I have said of more than one person who struggled long and hard: He or she, like all of us here, grappled with demons and despair longer than many of us knew. The nights were long, sometime very long, but somehow the light broke through. As the Buddha says, no one knows what another person is dealing with. Therefore always assume they're doing the best they can.

I've discovered that when demons, darkness and despair are acknowledged publicly in a memorial service, family and friends—who usually know the truth anyway but fear to say it out loud—are grateful and relieved. The truth does, indeed, set us free. Free to breathe a sigh of relief. Free to simply breathe and laugh again.

I don't know about putting "fun" into funerals. But I do try to include the truth. And that's why every memorial service here begins with a reading of Genesis chapter one. Genesis one is not the oldest word in our faith tradition but it is the first and for good reason. Genesis one is not an account of how the natural world began once upon a time long ago. For us, evolution tells that story far better. Rather, Genesis one is an affirmation of what we can count on when our lives fall into darkness, despair and chaos, when the light falls out of our world.

When God began creating the earth was dark and formless, the Spirit brooded over the watery mess. You know, the way we sometimes feel. Stuck in the darkness, bent out of shape, under water. We can't breathe. And then God said, let there be light and there it was. And eventually as this mythic poem continues there would be seas, land, vegetation—a whole planet teeming with all kinds of life forms. Not over night but ever so gradually, time and time again, the Spirit lures and nudges us back to life. We get our heads above water, we breathe again, we find a place to stand. We find room to flourish in a new world that God is re-creating just for us.

Light out of darkness. Life out death. One breath, one day, one hug at time. With the help of the community of saints past and present we begin to see a dawn in every darkness. We can hardly see it on our own. It takes a community—a community of the Spirit.

IN THE BULB THERE IS A FLOWER

By Natalie Sleeth

In the bulb there is a flower; in the seed, an apple tree;
In cocoons, a hidden promise: butterflies will soon be free!
In the cold and snow of winter there's a spring that waits to be,
Unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.

There's a song in every silence, seeking word and melody;
There's a dawn in every darkness, bringing hope to you and me.
From the past will come the future; what it holds, a mystery,
Unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.

In our end is our beginning; in our time, infinity;
In our doubt there is believing; in our life, eternity,
In our death, a resurrection; at the last, a victory,
Unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.