

Coram Deo
All Saints' Day B
John 11: 32-44

Pastor Bruce K Modahl
Grace Lutheran Church
November 1, 2009

In Jesus' Name.

Last Sunday Pastor Faulstich assigned a Latin phrase to the Reformation festival. It was *semper reformanda*, which means "always reforming." God is always reforming the church as God calls us to meet the ministry God intends for us. Not wanting to be outdone I have a Latin phrase to assign to this Sunday's festival. The phrase is *coram Deo*, which means "before the face of God." The goal of all God's saints is to stand before God face to face, *coram Deo*.

To come face to face with anybody requires a journey, movement of some sort. You have to get where that person is. With technology we can stay put and accomplish a great deal with virtual meetings. When we accepted the call to come here over 11 years ago now, we decided that Jackie and Martin would stay behind in Tampa for his senior year of high school and Rachel and I would come here for her first year of high school. We prepared by purchasing two web cams. Our son downloaded Skype, got all the technology wired up and lined up and explained to me so I could make it go from our end. We used it one time. Seeing them only made their absence more painful. So we stuck with phone calls and Oh, the joy of laying hands on them when they came to visit or Rachel and I went there. We keep in touch with phone calls, email and text messages. We go on Facebook with a virtual community and are LinkedIn and maybe even send tweets. But nothing takes the place of coming *coram caris*, before the face of the beloved. To stand *coram caris* a journey is required.

The choir just sang to us about those who have come to the end of their earthly journey. "They are before the throne of God, worshipping day and night within the temple. And the one who sits upon the throne will shelter them." They have traveled far to come before the throne. The song is plaintive because they no longer are before our eyes. It is plaintive because we need shelter as we continue on the journey.

Isaiah describes that day when we stand *coram Deo* at the climax of history. When time times out, the Lord of hosts sets a table for all peoples. Consider all those banquet tables laid end to end and God the chef and server. He destroys death's shroud. He will swallow up death forever. That is the verse inscribed on the marble wall in our memorial garden. The names of

those buried in the Memorial Garden are inscribed beneath that promise. They are buried under the promise, “He will swallow up death forever.”

John in Revelation 21 echoes Isaiah. John had a vision of the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God. He heard a voice from the throne saying, “The home of God is among mortals.” God travels the distance to us so that we might stand *coram Deo*. And when we do, “He will wipe every tear from [our] eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away. See, I am making all things new.”

What then are we to make of Jesus in the Gospel account? He received news that his friend Lazarus was gravely ill. He did not make the journey to come face to face with Lazarus before he died. He waited. The climate dictated that Lazarus was buried as soon as possible. In the traditions of that time family members closed the eyes of the deceased and tied the mouth shut. They washed the body, anointed it with spices and wrapped it in strips of linen cloth. They placed the body on a bier and carried it outside the village to the family tomb, often a naturally occurring cave or one carved out of the rock. Mourners accompanied the procession to the grave crying laments and chanting psalms. Sometime they paid flute players to accompany them. When they arrived at the tomb a brief eulogy was spoken and prayers were offered. The family and mourners then returned home to sit shivah, intense mourning that lasted for seven days. During the first three days of Shivah the tomb remained unsealed. The family returned to the tomb to mourn and to make sure the person was really dead. Premature burial was not an unknown occurrence. On the fourth day ones nose announced the person really was dead and the grave was sealed. Jesus came on day four. Lazarus is good and dead. By the time he got there Jesus came face to face not with Lazarus but with death. The Latin for that is *coram morti*. When Jesus came face to face with death he did what we do. The text says when Jesus saw Mary weeping he was greatly disturbed in spirit. But the word here is everywhere else used for anger. Jesus was angry. That is one of the emotions death causes us. We become angry at death for robbing us of our beloved, angry at God for constructing this creation in such a manner that we are bereft of friends and family, angry at ourselves for not doing more, paying more attention when our beloved was alive. Jesus was indignant at death’s power over God’s creation. And he wept. Jesus wept is the shortest verse in the King James Version of the Bible. It is so momentous it gets its own verse. What can we conclude then but the first things have not passed away. Death, tears,

pain, and grief rule the day. But then even with tears flowing Jesus commands, Take the stone away from the tomb. We know this story, don't we? Stone rolled away, a resurrected body, grave clothes set aside. "Hold your noses if you must," he said. "Lazarus, come out." Out he came dressed for his own funeral. "Unbind him," is Jesus' final order. Jesus was rehearsing for his own death and resurrection. The first things have not passed away. With Jesus, however, they are on their way out. With Jesus we come face to face with God in real time, our time, in the midst of our journey.

"O Day Full of Grace," a Danish folk hymn, is one of our favorites at Grace. It often serves as the final hymn at funerals. As the cross leads us in procession out of the church we sing,

When we on that final journey go
That Christ is for us preparing,
We'll gather in song, our hearts aglow,
All joy of the heavens sharing,
And walk in the light of God's own place,
With angels his name adoring.

The theme of a Christian funeral is the completion of the journey begun in baptism. During the funeral the church accompanies "a brother or sister to the place of union with God through the resurrection of Christ."¹ The godparents or sponsors present the one to be baptized whether a month-old infant or a 40-year-old adult. That brother or sister who has died is again presented at the entrance of the church.

A pastor named Tom Long writes about the yearly gathering of St. Paul Baptist Church at the banks of Louisiana's Ouachita River. "After several days of fervent prayer meetings and vigorous revival preaching... [they] baptize new converts to the Christian faith. The older members of the church call this spot on the river 'the old burying ground,' because of what Paul said about baptism, 'Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life' (Rom. 6:4). Here, in the flowing currents of the Ouachita, sinners are plunged beneath the

¹ Thomas G. Long, "The Good Funeral: Recovering Christian Practices," *The Christian Century* (October 6, 2009), 21.

waters to die with Christ, to be washed clean, and to be raised up to a new way of life.”² The newly baptized go back to the church and change into dazzling white clothes.

So do we clothe the newly baptized for baptized into Christ we are clothed in the righteous of Christ. We put a baptismal robe on ourselves on the day of our confirmation and one will be placed over us again at our funeral. Baptism is invoked as the white pall is placed over our bodies in casket or urn. We position the processional cross at the front. We place it there in defiance of death. Romans 8:31ff is a favorite passage for funerals. It begins, “What then shall we say about this?” Paul was not talking about death. However, used for a funeral this can only refer to the body. The cross lifted up over us is what we shall say about it. At the cross death and devil came *coram Deo*, before the face of God. By Jesus’ dying and rising God will swallow up death forever. Baptized into Christ’s death and resurrection we have faced the only death we have to be afraid of.

We light the paschal candle, the big one that is placed by the font. We light it on the Vigil of Easter and all the Sundays of Easter. Then we light it for each of us at our baptism and again at our funeral. Our lives are enfolded in the life of Christ.

Most often we eat a meal together. It is a meal that is a foretaste of the banquet Isaiah described on God’s holy mountain. It is at the Lord’s Supper that the Jordan River is at its narrowest. At this table the distance between here and there is at its shortest. We can almost hear our loved ones among the blessed saints singing, “Worthy is Christ the Lamb who was slain.” We process from here to the grave. We accompany them with singing.

We come to funerals to tell the gospel story. We do so as Jesus did, for the bystanders. There are always some at every funeral who will not open the script and join in. We tell it so they might believe. We rehearse the script for one another, proclaiming death does not have the final word. We need to rehearse for our final hour so that we face death with the assurance that we shall stand *coram Deo*, before the face of God.

² Thomas G. Long, *The Christian Funeral: Accompany Them with Singing* (Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 2009), 79.