

**Good Shepherd Presbyterian Church**  
**Reverend Dr. Daris Bultena**

**All Saints' Day**  
**November 1, 2009**

Psalm 24:1-10

<sup>1</sup>The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it,  
the world, and those who live in it;  
<sup>2</sup>for he has founded it on the seas,  
and established it on the rivers.  
<sup>3</sup>Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord?  
And who shall stand in his holy place?  
<sup>4</sup>Those who have clean hands and pure hearts,  
who do not lift up their souls to what is false,  
and do not swear deceitfully.  
<sup>5</sup>They will receive blessing from the Lord,  
and vindication from the God of their salvation.

<sup>7</sup>Lift up your heads, O gates!  
and be lifted up, O ancient doors!  
that the King of glory may come in.

<sup>8</sup>Who is the King of glory?  
The LORD, strength and mighty,  
the LORD, mighty in battle.

<sup>9</sup>Lift up your heads, O gates!  
and be lifted up, O ancient doors!  
that the King of glory may come in.

<sup>10</sup>Who is the King of glory?  
The LORD of hosts,  
he is the King of glory.

John 11:32-44

<sup>33</sup>When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. <sup>34</sup>He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." <sup>35</sup>Jesus began to weep. <sup>36</sup>So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" <sup>37</sup>But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" <sup>38</sup>Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. <sup>39</sup>Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." <sup>40</sup>Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if

you believed, you would see the glory of God?" 41So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. 42I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me." 43When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" 44The 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."

## **"Surrounded"**

**"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..." -- Hebrews 12:1**

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**We did not have any video games. We did not have CDs and DVDs. We did not have computers. We did not have Play Station or Wii or even Nintendo.**

**What we had were oodles of plastic figures. About half were green. The army men. About one fourth were blue and brown. They were the cowboys. The other fourth were red and yellow. They were the Indians. We played army men, cowboys and Indians. There were plenty of ways to play.**

**Surely we mixed them up, but most of the time either you had the army men, or you had the cowboys and Indians. Contrary to the black and white western movies, in our world of play usually the cowboys and Indians were aligned working together and facing off with the army men.**

**No matter how they were divided up the resolution to our play was clear. The one group could do in the other group based upon one factor. The extent to which they were surrounded. The group that surrounded the other was the winner. The ones who were surrounded were the losers.**

**It seems obvious, of course, why this is true. The ones who were surrounded—whether they were the cowboys/Indians or the army men—the ones who were surrounded had no hope. They were cut off. They did not have any chance of survival.**

**To be surrounded was to be done in. It made it true to the life of the black and white western movie. To be surrounded was to be done in. It meant that you were cut off, and it meant that there was no hope at all.**

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**Black and white western movies, childhood play, military strategy—all of it is not true to the life of the gospel. Indeed the gospel flies in the face of all that we are taught by the world.**

**Even the concept of being surrounded. To be surrounded is our strength and not our undoing. To be surrounded is to be build up not torn down. To be surrounded is to find life not loose it.**

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**We are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses—that is how the writer of the letter of Hebrews puts it. And this morning we are surrounded by a physical reminder of those witnesses who as part of our life have gone before us. (Note: the chancel area is filled with pictures and mementos of loved ones of the congregation.)**

**These witnesses set us in the place of strength and call us to see that God’s presence is all around us. These witnesses invite us to remember that the very one who broke bread and shared the cup with that rag tag group of disciples is the very one who was raised from the dead. In him all of the story is re-written. It is not death but life that has the final word.**

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**We are surrounded by that in the story. Here is Jesus and he has been away. Word reaches him that his friend Lazarus is sick. He is deathly sick. And then finally we realized that Lazarus has died. Jesus does not rush in. He takes his time in getting onto the scene.**

**Now Lazarus and his sisters Mary and Martha were close to Jesus and he to them. He had eaten with them, taught them, and was even anointed by Mary. It seemed curious that he did not want to rush to their sides. Instead, Jesus takes his time.**

**When he does arrive it is Martha who greets him. She comes to him with the news. And she expresses her concern that he had not been there. After all, she knew this Jesus and she knew him well. She knew that this one who had the power to make the blind see could surely have the power to have made her brother well. But alas, he was too late.**

**Her Jesus had missed the chance. Lazarus was dead. There was nothing to do now but accept the reality, mourn the loss, and attempt to move on with life. Too bad he had not been there, oh, five or six days ago. Things may have turned out different.**

**Jesus looks at her and says, “Your brother will rise again.”**

**She looks back at Jesus and acknowledges the creed. She says that she knows that he will rise again in the resurrection of the dead on the last day.**

**It is then that Jesus speaks the words to Martha, which were not included in the morning’s reading, but are so primary to the story. Jesus says to Martha: “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.”**

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**This story of Jesus and the raising of Lazarus tells us on this All Saints’ Day that there are some things that we need to lay aside as the ones who are surrounded.**

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**The first thing we need to set aside is our inability to see life in the present tense.**

**There is this whole tense thing going on in the story. Jesus says, in the present tense, “your brother will rise again.” Martha responds that she knows this, in the future tense, “he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.”**

**Jesus, again present tense, tells her: “I am (as in right now, the present tense) the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me,**

**even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.”**

**We tend in our faith to see the rewards of our faith as something that is out there. It is in the future. We tend to orient our world, even our world of faithfulness, in such a way that life and heaven are in the future. We are moving towards it. Eternal life is later—after we are no longer here.**

**And oh, let me tell you, there are great things to come. I am with the apostle Paul when he says “to die is gain, but to live is Christ.” There are great things awaiting me and you—and many of our witnesses are there. Praise God!**

**Praise God indeed! But, that does not negate that we are not there yet. We are here—and it is in the present tense that Jesus tells Martha, “I am the resurrection and the life.” We are to hear that present tense proclaiming Savior. We are to hear him saying to us that right now is the resurrection, and that right now there is life.**

**That life extends to us—and it has power over all the physical deaths that we face. We face many deaths in our lives—and not just the death of our loved ones either. We face the deaths of many of our dreams and many of our hopes and much of how we thought things would be.**

**Jesus speaks life over that in the here and now. It is not only a matter of what is to come and the good stuff that is associated with that—it is also a matter of claiming that life as power over all those deaths we face right now.**

**We need to lay aside our neglect of seeing that life as part of the pulse that we live in right now. Resurrection and life—we are in it and of it.**

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**We also have to lay aside our notions of limitations. Jesus is there calling out to Lazarus who is in the tomb. He has been dead for four days. There is a stench for sure. He is not merely dead, but dead dead! In the ancient world all possibility of life is long past by the time one reaches the third day. So for Lazarus to have been in the tomb four days it is clear that there is not an iota of hope for anything.**

**Jesus calls out to him. Jesus calls for the stone to be moved. They think he has lost it. And then, oh then, Lazarus emerges from the tomb. He’s wrapped up in the grave dressings. “Unbind him. Let him go.”**

**This is impossible. The dead just do not come to life again. This is impossible. Precisely. We cannot put the limitations of the world on the Creator God of the Universe. Just when we think it impossible—just then that limitation is a false boundary. With God all is possible. Even life from the midst of the place where we think there can be none.**

**God has a way of transforming our limitations into that which is beyond our comprehension. They could not comprehend what had taken place in Lazarus. It was a foreshadow. It was a demonstration of that which would come in Christ. It was the sign and wonder—they could see it or miss it. I was the sign of the promise of God.**

**We dare not limit God. This is the God of limitlessness. There is no limitation on what this God of ours can do and be. In Lazarus there is this clear reality that God traverses all the boundaries.**

**All those endings of the world are false boundaries. All those limitations of this age are human set limitations. We are in a living relationship with a God of limitless possibilities.**

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**This incredible God—that is seemingly so far off from who we are and how we grapple with the world. That amazing God—oh there at the scene with Mary and Martha and Lazarus in the grave—right there we are told, “Jesus began to weep.”**

**How is it that this God of all weeps? Yes, see there it is. We see the character of God. God so loves us, in the language of John, “God so loves us” that God bends to our needs and meets us in our brokenness.**

**This God of the ages—who was before all and knows all glory—this God will lean into us as we face our struggle and know our difficulty. “Jesus began to weep.”**

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**You see that is the strength of being surrounded. It is the experience of the witnesses. That through the ages we have this God who promises to be with us, and is with us. We have this God who takes bread and cup and**

**invites us to share it on this side of the cross. We are invited to share it and trust and know that there is a resurrection beyond all glory.**

**And so we are surrounded. Yes with these witnesses. Yes with those who already know the fullness of the glory of God. We are surrounded.**

**We are surrounded by them and we are surrounded by this Spirit of Life that moves in the Body of Christ. We are surrounded by this love of God that in us, and through us, and with us.**

**And as we are so surrounded it is clear---it is clear where we are to be. We are to be surrounding others. Unlike the childhood games with the plastic figures—it is in our surrounding that we find hope.**

**So, great cloud of witness—all of you—surround each other in here—and out there—oh especially out there, there are ones waiting for you to surround them with the kind of love that God has surrounded you! Amen.**