

All Saints, All Souls
Psalm 116: 12-15
I John 3: 1-3

3 November 2019

God's Memory

In the spring of 2016, a mural began to go up along the embankment wall of the Tiber River in Rome. Because I was tagging along on my husband's research trip, I was in Rome at the time and lucky enough to be able to watch it take shape. The mural was the creation of the South African artist, William Kentridge, made through a process called "reverse graffiti." The artist created enormous stencils—some more than 30 feet tall—and then brought them down to the river, affixed them to the wall, and power washed around them. The images that remained when the stencils were removed were made from the grime that had accumulated on the wall over the years.

More than 80 images process along the wall for a third of a mile, reflecting the history of Rome from the founding of the city to the present. The wolf who nursed Romulus and Remus appears, and the emperor Marcus Aurelius on his horse. Some of the images poke sly fun at Roman culture, like the one of a nun receiving communion from an Italian coffee pot. Other images recall the violent displacements that mark Rome's history: Roman soldiers returning from Jerusalem bearing aloft the treasures of the Temple they destroyed; Roman Jews being deported by the Nazis in 1943; refugees with their possessions strapped to their backs, boarding crowded boats for the difficult crossing from Libya to Italy. Kentridge called his mural "Triumphs and Laments," drawing our attention to the terrible intimacy of victory and loss, reminding us that triumphs all too often bear lamentations in their wake.

In the midst of this pilgrimage of humanity through the triumphs and terrors of history, the artist placed an image of a simple dark panel on wheels, a kind of caravan with a phrase scrawled across it. "Quello che non ricordo," it says: "what I don't remember." In the midst of a procession of some of the most well-known stories in the world, Kentridge made sure to mark all that has been forgotten. Because it is not just the emperors on their horses or conquering armies that shape the world we've inherited. History is moved forward in countless ways by the lives of those history does not memorialize—the relationships they forged, their hopes and aspirations, their triumphs and laments. Kentridge's caravan of unremembered stories rolling down the Tiber Wall is not just a footnote to history. It's *most* of history.

The artist's attempt to memorialize all that history does not remember in the midst of all that it does seems to me a fitting image for our celebration of this radically inclusive feast of *All Saints* and *All Souls*. To memorialize not only our own losses, our own histories, our own beloved dead but also those whose stories we do not know is demanding work, both ethically and spiritually. Honoring what we can't remember is an act of reverence that requires us to travel to the furthest reaches of what we know—and then to press on even further. It calls us to care about the lives of those whom history has forgotten and to turn toward those in our own day and age whose unfolding history we have ignored. It reminds us that, whether we acknowledge it or not, our triumphs and laments are interwoven with those of others, that we are implicated in their lives,

and they in ours, even when we do not know each other's names. It asks us to expand our sense of who is included among our beloved dead.

Of course, it's hard enough to reverence the memory of those we do know. One of the privileges of working at the Memorial Church is being invited into the many memorial services that take place here. And you quickly learn that one of the most difficult things about planning a memorial is how to limit the number of people who will speak. Because we all want to honor a full picture of the person we are remembering. But it soon becomes clear that no one person's memories or two or three or more will be able to wholly comprehend the life we have lost.

One of the names on the list in our bulletin is that of a dear colleague of mine, someone I knew well, someone with whom I shared meals and gossip and work and travel. Last month, after her unexpected death, family members and friends, students and colleagues, gathered for her memorial. People shared so many great stories, stories that confirmed my own experience of her—her generosity with her time, her careful attention to her students' lives and work, her devotion to Bob Marley and to the Grateful Dead, and her humor. But I found that even as those stories did somehow conjure her up for a moment, they also left me with the sense that maybe I had never really known her at all. Not because the stories didn't reflect the person I knew but because there was just so much of her life that I hadn't known or understood, so much of her that was inaccessible to me. "Fifty pairs of eyes were not enough to get round that one woman with," one character thinks of another in Virginia Woolf's novel, *To the Lighthouse*. There was so much more to my friend than I could ever know, even if she were still alive, as I wish so much she were.

It's not just the dead that we encounter on the Feast of All Saints and All Souls. It's ourselves as well—the limitations of our perspective, our impossible longings, our own mortality. The question raised by this day is not just "who were they?" but "who are we?"

Where can we go to work on these questions? What practices will help us? On Friday, some of us made a pilgrimage with Professor David Carrasco to the Day of the Dead altars at the Peabody Museum. And it was there that I realized that my desire to somehow know my friend wholly in her death was misguided. We can't know each other fully, in life or in death. The altars created for the Day of the Dead are made of fragments—of special objects, of food and drink, of flowers and banners, of prayer cards and photographs. The altars are not intended to comprehend the dead but to open a place to spend time with them. "We're all on pilgrimage together," David told us. "The dead move toward us, and we move toward them. The altar," he said, "is a meeting place."

There are many such meeting places in the life of faith where the living and the dead form new communities. We've been already been around one this morning—the baptismal font. Hayden's ancestors in the faith greet her there, her new brothers and sisters in the present celebrate her, and she points us all toward the future. We'll end this morning at another meeting place—the meeting place of the communion table, where Christ welcomes us to a feast at which all are welcome and connects us to those gathering around other tables in places near and far. But these rituals do not solve the mysteries of our dead or even of ourselves. As Thomas Merton once said of the mysteries of faith: "the unknown remains unknown." The function of faith, he insisted, is

not to reduce mystery to rational clarity, but to integrate the unknown and the known together in living whole, in which we are more and more able to be transformed.

Or, as our reading from the first letter of John puts it: “Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed.”

Last summer, I visited Salt Lake City with my parents and my sister and nephew. We spent an afternoon in the natural history museum at the University of Utah which is full of the most extraordinary dinosaur skeletons I have ever seen—their impossibly long necks swooping through the galleries, their heads crowned by fierce ruffs of bone. This was a past far, far beyond even the most ancient images on William Kentridge’s mural—a past so distant, and so unpeopled, that it was hard to believe that it was our past. But we inhabit the same earth as those creatures did, and live beneath the same sky. They, too, are our dead.

But an interesting thing about this museum is that, before we entered the world of the past, they asked us to consider the world of the future. Stenciled onto the wall outside the entrance to the exhibits were words from Terry Tempest Williams, the writer and environmental activist. “The eyes of the future are looking back at us,” we read, “and they are praying for us to see beyond our own time.”

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This is where the feast of All Saints and All Souls leads us: to the place where past, present and future meet. Which is the altar, the communion table, the baptismal font. But which is also *every* place. Every place is saturated with histories known and unknown, every place a site for making choices for a future we will not live to see but are called to care about as deeply as we care about the time in which we do live.

The poet Sharon Olds once asked: “Are the dead there/if we do not speak to them?” The mural on the Tiber wall bears witness to the presence of the dead, borne along through history, remembered or not, spoken to or not, on pilgrimage with all of us. As I watched that mural go up on the wall, I came to think of that caravan of “what I don’t remember” not only as a memorial to what has been forgotten, but as an ark carrying God’s memory through history that might just as easily have been inscribed with a verse from our psalm this morning: Precious in the sight of God is the death of the saints. Our understanding of history is always partial, but God remembers everything. To carry God’s memory with us through our processions of triumph and lament is to know that our accounts of our histories and our understandings of ourselves and each other are never complete. “Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed.” And there’s the good news. For if we are more than we can even imagine ourselves to be, then we can change. And if we can change, we might be able to answer the prayer of the future.

Almost immediately after Kentridge’s mural went up on the embankment wall, weeds and wildflowers started pushing through the cracks between the bricks, delicately disrupting those monumental images. By now, I expect those images have been obscured even more, as fresh soot

and smog attach, once again, to the wall. If I'm lucky enough to see the Tiber River again one day the images will probably have faded away entirely. The past is always being swallowed up. We reclaim it where we can, on walls, in classrooms, around altars, with memorial services and feasts. This is sacred work—the work of prayer—because only in God are any of our stories fully known. If we want to know who we have been and who we might become, if we want to know the stories that have been lost, and what they call us to do and be, we're going to have to search our collective memory, and the fathomless depths of God's as well.

Amen.

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