

“Never Lost to God”

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Isaiah 25:6-9

John 6:37-40

Celtic Christianity has a tradition of thin places. These are places where the boundary between the sacred and the ordinary is very thin, and there is the possibility of crossing from one world into the other. This recognition of the entry points between holy and ordinary are not only present in Celtic traditions. In the Pacha Mama goddess traditions in Peru they have a sense of that as well. Several years ago I accompanied some church people in Peru as guests of the ecumenical protestant churches there. We went out to the countryside and I was amazed to see colorful shrines scattered throughout the Andean landscape. My hosts told me that these shrines mark the spot where someone transitioned from life to death. Much of their artwork around death shows skeletons peeking out of doors and windows, as if that line between life and death is as easy as opening a door or window. Further, since we were visiting mountainous mining country, the local people believed the mouth of the cave was also the sacred entry to the Pacha Mama goddess of Incan mythology. There were often offerings left at the mouth of the cave, because some people believe that in exchange for extracting minerals from the caves, workers needed to leave something in return to the goddess who inhabits the mountains.

Birth and death are both thin places. They are doors and windows that are sacred passageways from one life into the next. We always focus on birth as a God-filled moment as we have thanksgiving and joy for the new life among us and look with hope at the potential in a tiny baby. But I believe

death is just as sacred a passage, although much harder on those left to live here on earth. In both life and in death, God acts as a holy midwife, ushering us through from one existence to the next, whether it is an easy passage or a passage surrounded with groaning and strain. Our Christian tradition teaches that death completes our baptism. So it is a real blessing to have Sebastian's baptism begin our service, and his (smile/tears) remind us that these living waters follow us throughout and even beyond our lives here on earth.

We can have hope that there is something more than our time here on earth through the scripture promises. I also have accompanied both family members and church people in their passages from life to death. I have seen several times when someone dying gets a boost of energy right before their death. Someone who hasn't talked in days will suddenly have much to say. Some people have shared visions with me. At times this boost seems like a turnaround, as if maybe they could be getting better instead of heading quickly toward death. But I believe this burst of energy is a foretaste of what God will give them in the life to come. I remember when my mom's mom died. My grandmother had been in the hospital for two weeks with pneumonia. The hospice nurses let us know that her death was coming soon, so all the aunts and uncles and cousins gathered round her. Suddenly, my grandmother who had been unconscious for two days, opened her eyes and exclaimed, "It was the happiest day! A picnic, and everyone was there. It was like the Fourth of July. There were all the best foods, fried chicken, and I was so happy, and everyone was there!" She lost consciousness again and within an hour she was dead. But in her dying she somehow witnessed to us a foretaste of something good, and so we all felt okay in her release. If she could enjoy fried chicken and friends, she sounded pretty much set. I hope she gets to try Korean fried chicken in the afterlife, because then she really will be in heaven.

I know that some people have a difficult time buying into the idea of an afterlife, and I think that faithful Christians can have legitimate doubts about

life after death. But I also hear Jesus' words in John's gospel, "I shall lose nothing of all that God has given to me," and it gives me assurance that whatever happens to us after we die, we shall never be lost to Jesus, who embodies God's love for us and models the way toward resurrection.

My grandmother had a vision of a picnic feast where everybody was there; Isaiah prophesies of a mountain feast, of "rich foods" and "well-aged wines", of "rich food filled with marrow."

The poet and philosopher Henry David Thoreau wrote that he was going to "live deep and suck the marrow out of life." My grandfather, who lived during the Great Depression, was never one to waste food. We all knew better than to leave a morsel on our plates when we ate at my grandparents, although cleaning our plates was never hard with Grandmother's delicious Southern cooking. I remember one day seeing my grandfather eat a chicken leg at a picnic. He meticulously ate every scrap of meat off that bone until the bone was clean, so clean that not even a smear of grease remained. Does anyone eat chicken like that? Then my grandfather bit into the bone and sucked the tiny bits of marrow out of that too. I always think of him when I eat chicken, and now when I'm teaching my daughter to make sure the bone is clean his instruction remains in my head.

Isaiah describes God's feast for all peoples as a feast of "rich food filled with marrow" and well-aged wines. An interesting thing about marrow is that it is something that often gets overlooked as we are trying to tug the meat off the bone. But if you look inside the bones, especially of larger animals, you will find a very flavorful reward, an unexpected bonus of what this life has offered. When my mother-in-law first moved here from the Philippines, she noticed that the butcher was throwing out trimmings of meat that her white neighbors weren't interested in buying: stomach, neck, tail, and yes, bones with marrow still inside of them. When she asked, the butcher would give her these scraps for free and she would cook them into soups and stir-fry with a certain satisfaction in her own resourcefulness--

until the butcher caught on that with the growing number of immigrants in their Queens neighborhood that he could actually make money on these spare parts. Enjoying not just the meat but the marrow too shows you are appreciating the abundance God has set before you.

However, it is hard to recognize abundance in the shadow of death. Especially when we are grieving. Especially when our aging or failing bodies remind us of our own mortality. Especially when money is so tight, we do not care about the life to come; we are merely trying to survive in *this* life, thank you very much!

Is it possible that we are too eager to discard the lives God has given us without discovering the deepest richness God calls us to enjoy today? My friend Mark modeled for me one way he literally discovered the marrow of life in the face of death. I asked him to recall his experience for me, and here is what he said:

“My story about marrow donation actually begins at church, where I met my friend Peter and where we grew up together. At age 18, he was diagnosed with leukemia, and his doctors eventually recommended a bone marrow transplant. A marrow transplant is typically a last hope, a last resort when nothing else will work, and I think it is a remarkable reminder of God's grace, of Christ appearing to travelers as a stranger, that there was someone out there--a complete stranger whom we will never meet--who underwent a surgical procedure in order to give the hope of life to Peter. For the rest of Peter's life, he was sustained by someone else's blood, literally the DNA of that stranger ran through his veins. Many recipients celebrate the date of their donation as a second birthday, a date from which life is given again.”

Mark told me, “While my friend Peter was preparing for his donation, I joined the marrow registry in support of him. After Peter died, it became a frequent prayer that I could give to someone else what the stranger had

given to Peter. In a positive sense, it was an act of faith to honor my friend's memory, a way to share his love with the world, and a way to represent his eternal life with the gift of life to another. It was also an act of religious struggle, though--wrestling with the question of why God allows a 20-year-old young man to have such pain and eventually die. Theologically, I don't believe that it was God's active choice, nor that one positive act would answer that question even if it were. But it still helps me when I struggle with that question of "why" to be able to see hope emerge from pain, and to watch life emerge from death."

We do not have to die and be resurrected to know God's power to grant richness to our lives. No matter our age or our health, each of us has within us bursts of life we may have not even suspected we possessed. When tended to and prepared, these bursts can propel us to share deeper love, to offer reconciliation, or even to offer someone else more life. These bursts of life are gifts of God that can offer to ourselves and others a foretaste of glory divine.

So, dry your eyes and prepare for the feast. Let us be glad and rejoice in God's salvation, in this life and beyond. Amen.