

Good morning Salt and Light. My name is Jacob, and my family and I have been a part of this unique community for a little over four years. Just by way of context, I studied theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, and I now work as a licensed clinical social worker for Clackamas County, where I work with people who are experiencing mental health crisis. I also apologize if I sound a little off today; I was sick this past week and my tonsils decided to act up; so if you have ever had your tonsils removed as an adult, please come find me after service, I may have a few questions about that!

Well, over the past month or so, our community has been wading through the murky waters of change and transition. Our outgoing pastor of 13 years, Melissa Reed, accepted a call to work with the newly-elected Bishop in the Oregon ELCA Synod, Laurie Larson Caesar. And so together we have been accompanying each other into a holy unknown, abiding in the delicate space between grief and expectancy, where we are midwifing both a kind of a death for our community – a goodbye to what has been familiar -- and a pregnancy – congratulations Salt and Light and Leaven community, we are pregnant!!! And we are doing what many pregnant people do, or so I have observed, we are taking it one day at a time, and we are planning, and dreaming, and anticipating together what might happen next.

And I believe that this thin liminal space of in-between-ness is exactly where we find ourselves on this particular Sunday, the Sunday of All Saints Day, where we are invited to take a closer look at the veil between life and death, only to find that it is much more transparent than we usually think, and we realize that it's all part of the same dance. This is also the last Sunday of our Green Liturgy, where we have been both honoring our relationship with the larger ecosystem that we call home and lamenting our role in its destruction. The end of daylight savings time today also signals more clearly that we are in a seasonal transition where we are about to spend much more of our time in darkness than in light, perhaps inviting inward reflection as we burrow down in cozy blankets with a warm mug. Leaves are falling, the chill in the air is brooding, and we know that seasonally we are about to lie dormant.

Naturally, then, this is the season where various traditions commonly observe days of remembrance for our ancestors – Dia de los Muertos, for example, and the tradition of AllHallowTide in Western Christianity consisting of All Saints Eve, All Saints Day, and All Souls Day. To be honest I wasn't raised in a version of Christianity that really observed these specific days, so it would not be authentic for me to try to explain their meaning or difference, but I do know that there is rich meaning and tradition in this particular season being a unique time to re-ground our connection to those who have come before us. So this morning I find myself clinging to these questions: Whose lives can we thank for us being gathered here today? And what happened before we were here to make this very moment that we are now experiencing come to be? And do these realizations invite our gratitude or our lament?

I'll be honest, I had been planning on preaching much more about our gospel text today, a perhaps familiar-for-some but inevitably odd story about Jesus who somehow manages to sleep in a boat during a wild and dangerous storm. I was planning it all out in my head, taking notes, asking myself questions, re-familiarizing myself with the context and struggles of the Markan community, basically doing things I thought preachers should be doing when they are preparing to give a sermon.

And then none of that happened because my life took an unexpected turn one week ago today, as I sat on the edge of a hospital bed just here at Providence next to my grandfather who just told me that, after having a really good conversation with the hospital chaplain, he had made the decision to stop receiving his life-sustaining dialysis treatments, which he had been receiving about three times a week for the past several years. For years my grandfather, Ray, has been plagued with numerous health complications that had him in and out of the hospital. Several months ago, he had one leg amputated just under the knee due to complications with his circulation, and now here he was in the hospital again having just had the same procedure done on his other leg. My grandpa was one of the most active people I have ever met, and now he had lost both of his legs within the same year. He did his very best to keep his spirits high these last few months, stubbornly telling us that he was hell bent on getting fitted for a prosthetic leg so he could drive his car again and try to find a place to live independently again. In short, he was doing everything he possibly could to fight the inevitable aging process. And

those among us here today who have worked in hospice and geriatric care are probably all-too-familiar with how challenging it is for many aging people to master one of the most important tasks of this stage of development: embracing our limitations. Though I would add that this is challenging for most of us in any stage of life.

But now here he was before me in a moment of vulnerability and clarity, and something had changed. So I asked him, what made you come to this decision? And the veil lifted. And in between brief moments of pain and incoherence he mustered a smile and said to me, “I have had enough.” And then he asked for my permission to let him go. So I said, “Of course, be free! Just know that you will always be a big part of who I am and even who my daughter Emmy is.” And we hugged, we laughed, and we cried. And then we spent the day calling friends and family, sharing words that really matter. Have you ever had a moment where you just shared words that really mattered?

Then in the early morning hours of Tuesday, Ray Albert Swayne Jr, who I lovingly called my “pops,” took his last breath of life, let go, and died. He was born on June 26th in the year 1936, and died at the age of 83, leaving behind his love of 63 years, my grandmother, Della Mae Swayne.

I have to believe that one of the most magical and powerful lessons that death and grief can offer us, if we are willing to see it, is clarity on what really matters in life. I had just been going on about my business until my grandfather’s words shook me out of my sedated, autopilot existence, and invited me to tune into something much more meaningful. And I find that the grief continues to pull me out of sedation, offering an invitation to be more present to what is happening around me – what a beautiful-but-demanding gift.

And honestly, I live so much of my life distracted, caught up in all my little daily worries, the never-ending temptations of greed and success, and the fruitless journey of perfectionism. But let’s not close our eyes, plug our ears, and lie to ourselves that tomorrow will always be there like as it is today. Let’s strive to live authentically with humility, generosity, and vulnerability. Salt and Light, you all have taught me to embrace grief and lament, and to befriend them as holy teachers.

I believe that grief invites us to the very edge of what we believe separates the living and the dead, allowing us for a moment to join our ancestors in this dance of life and death, perhaps teaching us that we are really only separated by our construct of linear time.

I would like to invite us into a brief moment of silent reflection. And I would like for each of us to consider whose life you carry in and through you. Who else is here among us today because you bring their presence, or who made an important difference on who you are today such that their life and your life are forever intertwined? Who accompanies you inside, either through your grief or your celebration, today? I am going to give us a few minutes to reflect on this and then I will invite us to pour out the names of these beloveds aloud in our sanctuary today.