

St. Mary's Episcopal Church Message by Rev. Michael Burke

Wisdom of Solomon 3:1-9; Revelation 21:1-6a; and [John 11:32-44](#)

Lazarus and the Long View

The everyday work of unbinding

"It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view. The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision. We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work. Nothing we do is complete, which is a way of saying that the Kingdom always lies beyond us.

*We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. This enables us to do something, and to do it very well. It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest. We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker. We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs. We are prophets of a future not our own."*¹ — Cardinal John Francis Dearden

"It is not your duty to finish the work (of perfecting the world), but neither are you at liberty to neglect it.." — Pirkei Avot 2.15-16

Good morning! Happy Sunday of All Saints.

Wow! What day. There is a lot happening here today.

It is All Saints Sunday. It is our annual stewardship pledge in-gathering Sunday, which will determine what St. Mary's looks like in the year ahead. And we have a truly once-in-a-lifetime election within 72 hours, that will be *enormously* influential for people here in our own community, and people all across the world in places like Ukraine and the Middle East. And, right in the middle of all that, we have Lazarus, from today's Gospel, who walks out of the darkness of the tomb into the light of the living.

Wow! Let's begin and let's begin at the beginning.

¹ <https://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/prayers-and-devotions/prayers/prophets-of-a-future-not-our-own>

All Saints Sunday, of course, is the day in the church calendar when we pause to remember all those who have gone before us into what the old hymns called “that larger life with God.” In the New Testament Book of Hebrews called “That great cloud of witnesses”² that surrounds us still.

Its not a practice that we arranged for this year, but several times in the past, we handed out photocopies of a blank “stained glass window,” and we were invited to draw a picture or paste a photograph of some one who is no longer alive with us – someone we have loved and released – but whose memory and vision still impels us forward in life and in mission. Sometimes it was a relative, a Sunday School teacher from our childhood, a spouse or partner – but someone who mission and work in life we have, at least in part, taken on as our own.

For all the big worthwhile things in life are the work of *generations*. It wasn't long ago that I preached a sermon about the way the stunning migrations of the Monarch butterflies work³. That the thousand-mile-plus journey, what National Geographic calls one of the greatest natural events on the planet, is not completed by one Monarch, but is the work of generations.

If our work in this world is to play our part in the -in-breaking Kingdom of God in this world, or as our Jewish siblings say in a different but analogous way, *Tikkun Olam*, the repair of the world,⁴

We are here today because of the faithfulness and work of so many who have come before us. Those who carried the faith through centuries of misunderstanding and hardship and persecution; those in our own generations who proclaimed the love of God for *all* people, and who were bitten by attack dogs while crossing the river on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama in 1965. Those who proclaimed the healing presence of God in times when hope was hard to find, and to walk in the Way of Love and Freedom was to walk in the Way of the cross. Much, much closer to home, we worship in a beautiful Sanctuary made possible by the gifts and persistence of those whose presence here today is spiritual, but not physical.

And that work , in turn, has become our work. Whether we are 15 or 95, this is the work that we have been given to do in our time.

In our baptismal covenant, we make vows in the presence of God and one another and in living out those vows each day we *“remember who we are and whose we are, we remember what God has done for us, and we remember that God in Christ establishes a covenant with us. The Baptismal Covenant is fundamentally God’s initiative. Our response to that covenant is to live as Jesus Christ lived, to live according to power of the Holy Spirit, to participate in God’s self-giving love for the world.*

The promises we make in the last five questions of the Baptismal Covenant spell out how we will respond to God’s initiative. Even then, it’s not all about our efforts. To each question, we respond, ‘I will, with

² Hebrews 12:1

³ <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/animals/article/monarch-butterfly-migration>

⁴ https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/3700275/jewish/What-Is-Tikkun-Olam.htm

God's help.' Our salvation lies not in what we do ourselves, but in what God does for us and through us and with us.⁵

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Today we celebrate and enact our annual pledge in-gathering. Each year, about this harvest time, we ask every participant in the life of St. Mary's to prayerfully consider what they willingly choose to give back to the work of God from all that God has given them, in a form of a pledge of financial support. Of course, it can be changed, added to, or ended at any time, as our lives often are filled with unexpected events.

But the sum total of all these pledges is the amount of funds we budget for in the upcoming year of 2025. We budget for snow removal, for heat and electric, for outreach and support of those who are most vulnerable among us – those who face food insecurity, are unhoused, working to achieve and maintain sobriety, children, elders – all those who make up this beloved community both inside and outside these church doors. And we make decisions about how and if to hire, retain, or release staff based upon the resources that we project will be available.

98% of the funds that make St. Mary's possible come from all of us, the people of St. Mary's, past or present. A lot of good happens in this world through the work of St. Mary's, and it happens through you and because of you.

At the Offertory, as is our practice once a year, I am going to invite and give all of us an opportunity to bring forward our completed pledge cards and place them on the altar as an offering back to God.

And as always, I am going to encourage you to give out of shared commitment and out of a sense of abundance and gratitude to God. I will say again – I do not think it healthy to give out of compulsion, or pressure, or shame. Our giving to support and participate in the work of God among and around us is our response to God's work in our own lives and in the lives of those we love.

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And yes, the hours are counting down. On Tuesday, we will elect the woman or man that will be the leader of the free world.

It won't surprise you that I will not suggest for who you should vote, because I have an unshakable faith all of us. I have faith that we will vote out values and our convictions, our hopes and not our fears, and that we will recognize, not just our own self-interest, but that this election will bring about consequences for the neighbors and friends and loved ones whose well-being we have vowed to defend and who dignity and worth in the eyes of God we are called to uphold.

⁵ The Rev. Dr. Ruth Meyers, in *"Baptismal Covenant and Commitment,"* dated October 12, 2009. See: <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/dfms/baptismal-covenant-and-commitment/>

Now, I know, some of us may be highly anxious. Some of us may be fearful of what might be the outcome. Many of us are preparing ourselves for the fact that we might not even know *who* has been elected until days or weeks later, as this may be one of the closest elections of our lifetime.

And in the end, the person we hoped would be elected might not be elected. And if that comes to pass, it may feel to many that it is the end of the world as we know it.

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So lastly, let us look at the Gospel appointed for today, this Sunday of All Saints. There is a lot going on here. But I'm going to ask you to focus this morning on a few details you might have overlooked.

The raising of Lazarus is the big headline. It gets all the attention. We even call this story "the Raising of Lazarus," don't we? But Lazarus never even speaks in all these many verses.

Who we hear from is Martha and Mary. They are Lazarus' sisters and friends of Jesus. It's a truly missed opportunity that the lectionary has the Gospel passage for today start where it starts, at verse 32. If we had started at *the beginning of the chapter, at verse 1*, we would have heard how Mary engaged Jesus with the full weight of her grief, sadness beyond words, even anger, at what has happened and at Jesus' seeming late arrival and his failure to prevent this. And she confesses her faith in Jesus as she draws from his lips one of the greatest of Jesus' "I Am" statements.

'Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again."²⁴ Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day."²⁵ Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live,²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" Martha said to Jesus, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

Even if your eyes are dazzled by the appearance of a miracle here, let us not do what the lectionary has done. Mary is in the very depths of grief, rage, loss...

Her life is in a very dark place. Hope has died, and her fears rise up as though to swallow her.

And yet, she persists. Martha stares into the existential darkness and calls out the Light! Yes lord, I do believe. He fastens her hands around her hope and she will not let go. Even in the moment where things make no sense at all, she reaches for and finds a faith that even when the entire world seems to be crashing in on her, she know who holds up the heavens. Martha in this moment is in a very deep place of faith, far beyond all evidence and all rational thinking.

Let me be careful. I am not saying that your candidate will not win on Tuesday night. I have no more powers of prognostication here than you do. We might hope. We might think we know. But nobody really knows until it happens.

And if Wednesday's dawning brings you celebration and joy, it will likely bring celebration and joy to me as well.

But hold a place in your heart for those who feel differently. We are at present a divided nation. Pray for peace and pray for reconciliation across our polarized families and communities and nation. Pray (and work) to protect the vulnerable, bring hope to those lost in despair, and then, begin the work again.

The work of generations. The work of those who labored long before us. The martyrs, the saints, and those we have known personally whose lives have shaped our lives, and whose work and ministry in the world has made it a better place.

And if Wednesday, (or weeks from Wednesday, if that be the case) sees your entire world crashing in around you. If you feel rage, despair, and hopelessness, remember Martha's witness.

Just like the beginning is never really the beginning, what seems to be "the end," is never really the end. The power and purpose of God is alive and at work in the world. Even when it feels that all is lost, and the stench of death is all around you.

Even then, from the darkness of sure and certain death, Lazarus comes out. When there seems to be "no way" forward, Jesus says to Martha: "Martha, I am the resurrection, and the Life."

Even in what seems like death, there is life.

And I will leave you with this:

Jesus calls Lazarus forth, from that place of seeming-no-return, but he is still bound. Bound in the restrictions and binding cloths of funeral and of death. The scriptures tell us: "his hands and feet [were] bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth.

Jesus does not wave his hand, so that the cloth bindings fall to the ground. He only calls forth.

And then Jesus turns and says plainly to the community gathered, Lazarus' friends, Jesus's own disciples, Mary, Martha, and the community gathered around. To them all, he says,

"Unbind him, and let him go."

The life-giving work right in front of us, invites both our participation and requires our action.

Unbind those who are called back to life.

Tarfun, a first century Jewish rabbi, once wrote: **"It is not your duty to finish the work (of perfecting the world), but neither are you at liberty to neglect it.."**⁶

Soon, win or lose, in the company of the saints who surround us still, we are going to have to learn what this means for us.

Unbind them. And let them go.

⁶ Rabbi Tarfon , in **Pirkei Avot 2.15-16**

Our sacred work of God's life-giving presence continues.

It will come through our hearts.

And it will come through our hands.

Amen.

Scriptures Appointed for Today:

The Collect

Almighty God, you have knit together your elect in one communion and fellowship in the mystical body of your Son Christ our Lord: Give us grace so to follow your blessed saints in all virtuous and godly living, that we may come to those ineffable joys that you have prepared for those who truly love you; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, in glory everlasting. *Amen.*

Old Testament - Wisdom of Solomon 3:1-9

The souls of the righteous are in the hand of God,
and no torment will ever touch them.

In the eyes of the foolish they seemed to have died,
and their departure was thought to be a disaster,
and their going from us to be their destruction;
but they are at peace.

For though in the sight of others they were punished,
their hope is full of immortality.

Having been disciplined a little, they will receive great good,
because God tested them and found them worthy of himself;
like gold in the furnace he tried them,
and like a sacrificial burnt offering he accepted them.

In the time of their visitation they will shine forth,
and will run like sparks through the stubble.

They will govern nations and rule over peoples,
and the Lord will reign over them forever.

Those who trust in him will understand truth,
and the faithful will abide with him in love,

because grace and mercy are upon his holy ones,
and he watches over his elect.

Psalm 24

1 The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, *
the world and all who dwell therein.

2 For it is he who founded it upon the seas *
and made it firm upon the rivers of the deep.

3 "Who can ascend the hill of the Lord? *
and who can stand in his holy place?"

4 "Those who have clean hands and a pure heart, *
who have not pledged themselves to falsehood,
nor sworn by what is a fraud.

5 They shall receive a blessing from the Lord *
and a just reward from the God of their salvation."

6 Such is the generation of those who seek him, *
of those who seek your face, O God of Jacob.

7 Lift up your heads, O gates;
lift them high, O everlasting doors; *
and the King of glory shall come in.

8 "Who is this King of glory?" *
"The Lord, strong and mighty,
the Lord, mighty in battle."

9 Lift up your heads, O gates;
lift them high, O everlasting doors; *
and the King of glory shall come in.

10 "Who is he, this King of glory?" *
"The Lord of hosts,
he is the King of glory."

The Epistle - Revelation 21:1-6a

I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

"See, the home of God is among mortals.
 He will dwell with them as their God;
 they will be his peoples,
 and God himself will be with them;
 he will wipe every tear from their eyes.
 Death will be no more;
 mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
 for the first things have passed away."

And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true." Then he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end."

The Holy Gospel - John 11:1-45

The Testimony of Martha

11 Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ²Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. ³So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." ⁴But when Jesus heard it, he said, "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." ⁵Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, ⁶after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. ⁷Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." ⁸The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?" ⁹Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. ¹⁰But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them." ¹¹After saying this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him." ¹²The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right." ¹³Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. ¹⁴Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. ¹⁵For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." ¹⁶Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

¹⁷When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. ¹⁸Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, ¹⁹and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. ²⁰When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. ²¹Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²²But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." ²³Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." ²⁴Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." ²⁵Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, ²⁶and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" ²⁷She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." ²⁸When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." ²⁹And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. ³⁰Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. ³¹The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because

they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. ³²When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

³³When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. ³⁴He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." ³⁵Jesus began to weep. ³⁶So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" ³⁷But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" ³⁸Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. ³⁹Jesus 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." ⁴⁰Jesus 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."

⁴⁵Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

"It is not your duty to finish the work (of perfecting the world), but neither are you at liberty to neglect it.."

Pirkei Avot 2.15-16 Rabbi Tarfon or Tarphon (Hebrew: רבי טרפון, from the Greek Τρύφων Tryphon literally "one who lives in luxury" Trifon), a Kohen, was **a member of the third generation of the Mishnah sages**, who lived in the period between the destruction of the Second Temple (70 CE) and the fall of Betar (135 CE).

Prophets of a Future Not Our Own⁷

It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view.

The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision.

We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work. Nothing we do is complete, which is a way of saying that the Kingdom always lies beyond us.

No statement says all that could be said.

No prayer fully expresses our faith.

No confession brings perfection.

No pastoral visit brings wholeness.

⁷ <https://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/prayers-and-devotions/prayers/prophets-of-a-future-not-our-own>

No program accomplishes the Church's mission.

No set of goals and objectives includes everything.

This is what we are about.

We plant the seeds that one day will grow.

We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.

We lay foundations that will need further development.

We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.

This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.

It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.

We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.

We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs.

We are prophets of a future not our own.

*This prayer was first presented by Cardinal Dearden in 1979 and quoted by Pope Francis in 2015. This reflection is an excerpt from a homily written for Cardinal Dearden by then-Fr. Ken Untener on the occasion of the Mass for Deceased Priests, October 25, 1979. Pope Francis quoted Cardinal Dearden in his remarks to the Roman Curia on December 21, 2015. John Francis Dearden (October 15, 1907 – August 1, 1988) was an **American Catholic prelate** who served as Archbishop of Detroit from 1958 to 1980, and was created a cardinal in 1969. He previously served as Bishop of Pittsburgh from 1950 to 1958. He was an outspoken advocate for equality and racial justice.*

Hebrews 12:1-21 *The Message paraphrase*

Do you see what this means—all these pioneers who blazed the way, all these veterans cheering us on? It means we'd better get on with it. Strip down, start running—and never quit! No extra spiritual fat, no parasitic sins. Keep your eyes on Jesus, who both began and finished this race we're in. Study how he did it. Because he never lost sight of where he was headed—that exhilarating finish in and with God—he could put up with anything along the way: Cross, shame, whatever. And now he's there, in the place of honor, right alongside God. When you find yourselves flagging in your faith, go over that story again, item by item, that long litany of hostility he plowed through. That will shoot adrenaline into your souls! In this all-out match against sin, others have suffered far worse than you, to say nothing of what Jesus went through—all that bloodshed! So don't feel sorry for yourselves. Or have you forgotten how good parents treat children, and that God regards you as his children? My dear child, don't shrug off God's discipline, but don't be crushed by it either. It's the child he loves that he disciplines; the child he embraces, he also corrects. God is educating you; that's why you must never drop out. He's treating you as dear children. This trouble you're in isn't punishment; it's training, the normal experience of children. Only irresponsible parents leave children to fend for themselves. Would you prefer an irresponsible God? We respect our own parents for training and not spoiling us, so why not embrace God's training so we can truly live? While we were children, our parents did what seemed best to them. But God is doing what is best for us, training us to live God's holy best. At the time, discipline isn't much fun. It always feels like it's going against the grain. Later, of course, it pays off big-time, for it's the well-trained who find themselves mature in their relationship with God. So don't sit around on your hands! No more dragging your feet! Clear the path for long-distance runners so no one will trip and fall, so no one will step in a hole and sprain an ankle. Help each other out. And run for it! Work at getting along with each other and with God. Otherwise you'll never get so much as a glimpse of God. Make sure no one gets left out of God's generosity. Keep a sharp eye out for weeds of bitter discontent. A thistle or two gone to seed can ruin a whole garden in no time. Watch out for the Esau syndrome: trading away God's lifelong gift in order to satisfy a short-term appetite. You well know how Esau later regretted that impulsive act and wanted God's blessing—but by then it was too late, tears or no tears. Unlike your ancestors, you didn't come to Mount Sinai—all that volcanic blaze and earthshaking rumble—to hear God speak. The earsplitting words and soul-shaking message terrified them and they begged him to stop. When they heard the words—"If an animal touches the Mountain, it's as good as dead"—they were afraid to move. Even Moses was terrified.