

Goodness and Faith  
Sunday Octt. 31, 2010  
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church  
Zach Thomas

Scripture: Habakkuk, chapter 1 (selected verses)  
II Thessalonians, chapter 1 (selected verses)

Once upon a time a man named Mr. Poor died and went to heaven. His neighbor, Mr. Rich, died a few days later. They were both members of the same church. Mr. Poor never much liked Mr. Rich who always drove Cadillac Esplanades, ate at the fanciest restaurants and pledged hardly anything to the church. On the other hand, Mr. Poor usually rode the bus and fixed himself spam sandwiches, but ended up giving more money to the church than Mr. Rich.

I didn't seem fair to Mr. Poor. In heaven Mr. Poor whispered to St. Peter, "I know a man as rich as a king. Still he never gave his neighbors a thing."

St. Peter said, "That would be Mr. Rich?"

"Exactly," said Mr. Poor. "And lemme tell you, the day Mr. Rich arrives, you know what I hope he gets?"

St. Peter said, "No, but I have a sneaking suspicion."

Mr. Poor clenched his teeth and said, "I hope he gets a rusty ol' halo, a skinny white cloud, and secondhand wings full of patches."

"That's sort of what I thought you had in mind," said St. Peter. "Anything else, like a robe, maybe?"

"Oh yeah, and a robe," said Mr. Poor. "...But a robe so wooly that it scratches."

"Whatever," said St. Peter.

Before we judge Mr. Poor too harshly, haven't we all known a person we hoped would one day get his or her comeuppance? Someone like Mr. Rich. If only life were more fair. The prophet Habakkuk, sitting in the rubble left by Babylonian conquerors, cries out to God: "Greedy men are so proud and, like death, never satisfied. Why do you make me see such trouble?" Then Habakkuk hears God say: "My answer may seem slow in coming, but wait for it."

If we jump forward in time to the early 1900s, we'll find another preacher also painfully aware of life's unfairness -- Rev. A. T. Fletcher. It didn't seem right to this itinerant preacher that by answering God's call he should end up 100s of miles away from his wife at the very moment she was giving birth. That's when he wrote, "...We're off made to wonder why it should be thus all the day long, while there are others living about us, never molested though in the wrong."

Then he adds, "Cheer up.... We'll understand it all by and by" -- hardly an improvement on the note God left for Habakkuk, in my opinion. We need something more than "Just wait" or "Cheer up" to address our suffering and grief from life's injustices, especially when death robs us of those we love.

We proclaim Christ's resurrection. We declare with St. Paul that "death has lost its sting." We believe in the communion of saints. These convictions are not just for

funerals. So, why don't we have more celebrations that help us look beyond the grave and feel closer to loved ones who have passed on?

Well, that's exactly why the church invented All Saints Day centuries ago. It's a day that helps us put death in its place, so to speak. It not only helps us remember loved ones, but it reminds us of how God's grace and goodness often came to us precisely through our loved ones.

However, the sad truth is, that although we mark All Saints Day on the church calendar, we Christians in the United States have never paid much attention to it. But thanks to a growing Latino/Hispanic population in our communities and churches, we do now. They call All Saints Day, Día de Los Muertos or Day of the Dead -- a day to celebrate a happy remembrance of loved ones who have died.

Here's some background. First, Day of the Dead is not Halloween. Halloween's origin is different and so is its purpose -- to frighten. Day of the Dead is meant to console. It helps us stay in touch with a communion of saints, not a confusion of haints.

Versions of Day of the Dead go back thousands of years, long before Christianity arrived. In these traditions participants often wore masks made of human skulls. In doing so, it's almost as if they meant to trick death by looking through the skull's eyes to peer into realms beyond death. Nowadays, festival goers on Día de Los Muertos honor the dead by visiting cemeteries, placing candles or favorite foods on the gravestones, or by carrying photos of their deceased love ones in parades and processions.

It's not difficult to understand why our Spanish-speaking friends south of us celebrate Day of the Dead with such gusto. Spanish conquistadores plundered indigenous populations by sword and by disease. Descendants of the old Mexican/Aztec empire have had to live under oppressive economic systems ever since.

Farther south in Guatemala the Maya people have also suffered severe cruelty for centuries. Warring tribes destroyed their temples. Zealous Catholic clergy burned their scriptures. Military death squads carried out genocide. No wonder they'd want to wear skull masks in a show of defiance against the threat of death.

It was in Guatemala that Sally and I witnessed a very unique way of celebrating the Day of the Dead. We came to a cemetery on a hill. There we saw hundreds of people of all ages flying kites. The kites had to be vigorously pulled to get them in the air -- no easy task when you're running at top speed through rows of grave stones. They were using kites as a symbolic way of connecting the living and the dead.

While for centuries our Latino neighbors participated in these imaginative rituals, here in the U.S. both African Americans and white folk were doing something similar, but with song. I recently looked through a book of 50 old time gospel songs and discovered that all but two were about making the journey through death to heaven. These songs have been sung for centuries by slaves, farmers and mostly poor congregations. Suffering from slavery, civil war, world wars and depressions, we've gained hope from these songs to put pain and sorrow behind us and join hands with loved ones.

We Presbyterians don't sing country gospel songs much, but I bet most of us carry the imagery of these songs in our minds. They picture us as pilgrims and travelers. We come from the rough side of the **mountain**, through dark valleys, dangers, toils and **snare**s. Dark clouds loom overhead. The sun is sinking on the

horizon. But we have faith that something better awaits us -- grace and victory. We see a sun peeping through the **clouds**.

Eventually, we come to the river **Jordan**. There we lay down our **burdens**. We take off sin-stained clothes and wash in a fountain filled with the blood of the Lamb. We hear sounds -- it's the noise of wings or an angel band.

After crossing over, we walk onto the kingdom shore. It's resurrection morning, lit by the Light of God on an unclouded **day**. This is the Hallelujah Side, the Blessed Promised Canaan Land. We stand under the Tree of Life and see a pearly **gate**. Passing through, we step onto streets made of **gold**. It leads to a golden city, where prepared for us is a **mansion**. Here we meet friends and loved ones. All are part of the shepherd's fold. Can you hear crying anywhere? Can you find any total strangers? Does the soul ever die? Do we ever grow old? Will you finally experience peace and joy divine?

St. Peter and Mr. Poor stood together, looking out upon heaven's glory. St. Peter asked, "Does it bother you that Mr. Rich may feel right at home when he gets here?"

"Exactly," said Mr. Poor. "It doesn't seem fair."

St. Peter asked, "But how are **you** feeling, Mr. Poor?"

"Oh, don't get me wrong," said Mr. Poor. "I like it. Don't deserve it, but...."

"Well," St. Peter interrupted, "do you think Mr. Rich deserves it?"

"For heaven's sakes!" said Mr. Poor.

"Then, you and Mr. Rich have something important in common. Don't you?" asked St. Peter.

"Maybe so," said Mr. Poor, rolling his eyes. He changed the subject. "So where's Jesus and God?"

"Look yonder," said St. Peter.

Way off shrouded in mist, Mr. Poor could make out the shape of a cross. "What's a cross doing here? I thought that was over and done with."

St. Peter's face went blank.

But Mr. Poor pressed on, "Is he on the cross, off the cross? Or what?"

"We don't know exactly," said St. Peter.

"Well, don't you think it's about time we found out?" asked Mr. Poor. "Let's go take a look."

"We've tried," said St. Peter, "but this is as close as we can ever get."

**Now** Mr. Poor was **totally** bewildered. He blurted out, "Well, if God has to live by a cross, I'd say God's in one mell-uva-hess, if you'll pardon my Latin."

St. Peter said, "You're on to something."

Mr. Poor focused on the thoughts suddenly unfolding in his mind. "God still suffers for us? Is that it?" asked Mr. Poor.

"That's what we concluded long ago," said St. Peter.

"That's got to be hell!" said Mr. Poor.

"Undoubtedly," said St. Peter.

Mr. Poor said, "So, lemme see if I got this right. If we're in sight of a never-ending hell -- and you say this is as close as we'll ever get to it...." Mr. Poor stopped in mid-sentence, amazed at where his logic was leading. He continued, "...Then we must be living in a never-ending heaven!"

“Absolutely,” said St. Peter. “You’ll find Christ everywhere, in each of us. The cross reminds us how deep God’s love really is. That’s why Jesus taught us to pray God’s will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

Mr. Poor thought of his wife, children, parents, and loved ones and realized that nothing would ever be able to separate them from each another -- not sin, not death, nothing on earth below or heaven above. He told St. Peter, “You know, when Mr. Rich gets here, I think even he is going to be moved to tears.”

In the scripture we read this morning, St. Paul told us to “endure and believe through all the persecutions and sufferings you are experiencing.” Well, St Paul, we’re doing the best we can. Our families are being torn apart by deportations, racial profiling, accidents, disease, war and death. But we desire to do more than endure. We want to rekindle our memories of loved ones and renew our hope to be reunited with all God’s children. That is our desire for goodness. As for our songs, photos, trips to the cemeteries -- that’s our work of faith.

Fortunately, Paul understands. Both these qualities are exactly what he prays for us -- a desire for goodness and the work of faith. You can find his prayer printed in your bulletin in the N.T. Lesson. Please join me in reading it. Afterward I will pray it in Spanish to close. It will help us celebrate All Saints Day. “May [God] fulfill by his power all your desire for goodness and complete your work of faith. In this way the name of our Lord Jesus will receive glory from you and you from him, by the grace of our God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.”

“Que Dios cumpla por su poder todos los buenos deseos de ustedes y los trabajos que realizan por fe. De esta manera, el nombre de nuestro Señor Jesús será honrado por causa de ustedes, y él los honrará conforme a la bondad de nuestro Dios y del Señor Jesucristo. Amen.