

All Saints' Day
November 4, 2018
The Rev. Ian Burch
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI

Though it has mainly gone out of vogue now, when I was in seminary, students were expected to study the Hebrew of the Old Testament and the Greek of the New Testament. I remember one professor suggesting that a great way to keep up with one's ancient languages is to make sure that — rather than using the English translations provided each week by the church — a good priest could work up his or her own translation every Monday morning so that the sermons would be enhanced by having spent so much time with the original texts. Even at the time, I remember thinking that seemed unlikely.

The truth is, I don't remember very much from the study of the biblical languages — mostly cramming for exams and trying not to sound too stupid when called on to read out loud in class. I do remember, though, one Greek word. And I only remember it because it's the verb that we used to learn all the different tenses. It's the verb to loose or unbind. In Greek: LYO.

If you're going to remember only one word from a biblical language, you could do worse than "unbind." Jesus says it a lot. He seems keenly interested in the mechanics of freedom, in the art of making people free. In Greek, the word has a volatile, explosive sense that we don't get in English. When someone is freed or unbound, in Greek, you can almost hear the rush of the wind or a loud crack that indicates their shackles are well and truly broken.

When Lazarus stumbles out of the tomb, reeking after being dead four days, and wrapped in strips of cloth, Jesus exclaims, "Unbind him!" Imagine the power in that command. Imagine the sense underneath the words — power, authority, divine will. There is something radically disruptive about looking someone in the eye and declaring that they are absolutely and utterly free.

That is what our God is about. On All Saints' Day, I wonder if a saint is simply a person who hears God say, "you are free" and then has the audacity to believe it. What happens to us when we believe that we are no longer wrapped in the clothes of the grave? What are the limits of our power when Jesus looks us in the eye and orders us unbound?

Both the prophet Isaiah and John, the author of Revelation, try to paint a picture of what an unbound life looks like. Isaiah imagines a mountain on top of which we feast on the richest food and wine sitting at a table that stretches out toward infinity. This mountain has forgotten death, and there is no mourning or weeping at its summit. Likewise, John imagines a holy city falling from the sky to settle on this earth, a city where death is no more and everyone who mourns is comforted by a God who dwells in the city with us.

Both prophets are using their best imagination to describe the life of a saint, the life of someone who really believes they have been set free by God. Both prophets paint a picture of life outside of the grave; life in the embrace of our God.

Our lives are short and fragile. It's probably no coincidence that we have a tendency to fixate on the grave or even choose the grave as a place to reside. But God is in the business of calling us out of our tombs and setting us free to eat on the mountainside or to dwell in the New Jerusalem. We are not grave people. We are unbound people, free to love our God and to love one another.

All Saints' Sunday can be a little pie in the sky. It's one thing to talk about some future feast on a mountainside or a shining city descending from heaven, but what does an unbound life look like here and now? I think I got a glimpse of it the other night, right here in the parish hall. Matt and I were teaching a communion class to some of the kids in the parish. We had some pizza and salad, talked about school, and then talked about what communion might mean in this day and age. The kids tried on the stole and the chasuble and took turns hosting the feast at a little altar we had set up. Watching those young saints learn about the bread and the wine that we share on Sunday morning struck me as a little slice of heaven right here and now. We were teaching them what it is to live a life unbound by the grave. We are free to respond to one and another with generosity, with grace, with fierce honesty, and with justice. We are free to love the unlovable. We are free to say no to the tyrant. We are free to teach our kids who they really are — children of God and the newest disciples to follow Jesus.

We taught those kids that they are free — just as we are free, being unbound by the words and will of Jesus. And that, saints, is good news. Believe that you are made free by God — utterly and lavishly free. And teach the young people in your life, the young saints in your life, the same thing. Leave the grave. Believe you are free. And find the feast on the mountain or in the city with the other saints of God. And bring everyone you can with you to share in the good news that we are all the saints of God. Amen.