Sermon on All Saints 2015
Baptism of Gary, Andrew and Thomas White and Thomas MacDonald
John 11:32-44

It’s the year 871, the heart of Europe’s so-called Dark Ages; it’s a time when people rarely travel outside their local regions; commerce is localized and tribal warfare rampant.

On the Isle of Britain (there is no nation called England at this time), a young 22 year-old man named Alfred is crowned the King of the West Saxons.

Immediately upon his accession he is thrown into a cauldron of anxiety and fear, into what will become a desperate seven year struggle against the Danes who have overrun the whole of what will, a century later, become England.

Over the course of the next 27 years not only will Alfred struggle to win military victories but, just as importantly, he will struggle to win the peace. Along the way he will discern that a key strategy will be to start the first national education program with Alfred himself supervising the translation of Latin texts into Anglo-Saxon, the precursor of English; growing the literacy of the people so that great advances in political and religious institutions will became possible in the centuries to follow.

In short, he is able to foster that very rare ideal: a Christian kingdom, with an exemplary Christian King. And by that I don’t mean he’s perfect or that nothing is wrong in his kingdom but, rather that from devastation, from almost nothing, indeed from death, with God’s help, something beautiful and lasting is created.

I’ve been speaking in the historical present tense for affect, but now back to the actual present tense; I could’ve run my finger down the Anglican Calendar of the Church year and picked any number of Saints and chosen them as exemplars on this one of our greatest Days, All Saints, but since we just celebrated Alfred’s day on October 26th, his example is fresh in my mind.

I chose Alfred because, as we continue with our Stewardship emphasis called “Draw Near to God,” Alfred is a powerful example of what stewardship means, how he gave of what God gave to him and how the world was changed as a result.

Alfred the Great, as he became known, and indeed all other saints, are great because they believed what is at the very heart and soul of our faith, a heart and soul that is captured in our gospel story.

One of the interesting things about what is central to our faith is that it seems to make itself known in the midst of impossibility.

Almost all of us, I would venture to guess, hear a story like the one I just narrated about Alfred the Great and even more so the one narrated in our gospel reading and wonder not only “Did this really happen?” but “Could this have happened?”

The “did this really happen” question is unprovable, whether you answer “no” or “yes.” In both cases we have what trusted historians call reliable witnesses. Notice that in deciding the truth of “did Alfred really do what is claimed for him?” or, more importantly, “did Jesus, say and do what the text says?” we are asked to trust reliable testimonies.

The second question is, actually, more important, “Could it have happened?” In other words, “what kind of world do we live in?” Do the metaphysics described here hold on a larger scale? Is there a God who interacts with our world and with humans in the way that Jesus demonstrates?

It’s a question that exposes differences in fundamental worldviews.

If we were to read further we would see that even some of those who were witnesses to this event believed it to be evil trickery! Re-animating bodies after they’ve lost their life force is not something possible in the universe.

Yet for some who witnessed this event, this is exactly what they saw and experienced! Some of us here this morning may be agnostic about whether this sort of thing can happen or not; perhaps we’re confused about it; if that’s you, welcome! The church is a place to process such normal questions.

Some of us are coming to the understanding that there is mystery in the world, in life’s purpose and meaning and that the evidence for those things is not merely “evidence” of God’s work and love for the world and those of us in it but an invitation to prayer and purpose.

Bringing all this together, the question our story asks us to wrestle with is “Are we open to believing that God, acting through Jesus, has power over the course of life and death?”

This is the question that Alfred the Great, that all other saints answered in the affirmative! This is the question that is before the parents and sponsors of Gary, Andrew, Thomas and Olivia today.

It is the claim of the New Testament and the Church that Baptism is a participation in the Community of the One who several verses earlier in today’s story said, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die, do you believe this?”

When the saints were confronted with this, what I’m calling the heart and soul of our faith and answered “Yes,” and when all of us, not just sponsors and parents, hear this claim and hear this question they and we are called into a living a certain way.

When Jesus says what he says and asks what he asks, he does so in the midst of a mess, the mess of death! We note that in response to the death of Lazarus and the great sorrow of Martha and the people around that Jesus is deeply disturbed, the word carries the connotation of anger and sorrow, he weeps, not something normal for men of that time.

If we take seriously what Jesus is about to do, the most God-like of actions, then we must say that it is not only the man Jesus, but God who feels this anger and sorrow; it is God who weeps.

Sometimes people come to church expecting things will run smoothly, that programs will be fully established; it is sometimes true that people *don’t* come to church because that’s what they imagine will be here: people and programs all put together in nice neat packages!

But this story tells us the first and most important part of God’s good news: God feels our pain and desires to bring life to us not where things are neatly packaged and put together because then we can’t simply rely on what we’ve done.

Baptism is the picture of this, as you know involves water; water is wonderful and central to human existence and yet it’s not something we pour on each other in public! It’s messy and uncomfortable to do so!

In other words this isn’t just a ritual this is how life works with God!

It is the challenge of trusting God to create something from nothing; to bring life out of the mess we’ve made of our lives, out of our situations, in a church that is small and struggling and yet which contains the creativity of the Holy Spirit!

This gospel story and the sacrament of Baptism also allow us take talk of death and resurrection not just at the end of life but in the midst of ordinary time.

It really was the case that Alfred did what he did; it really is the case that a relationship that seems hopeless can, with prayer and courage be not only salvaged but strengthened. It really is the case that Churches can grow, that people become joyful stewards and start ministries and transform their hearts and lives.

Of course, we continually are reminded that things are not the way they should be, that all of us will die, indeed, Lazarus would have died again, the double-edged sword that must have irked at some level as one of our council members pointed out this past Monday when we were studying this story!

This story points to Jesus, in his reactions of anger, sorrow and trusting connection to God as the true Human, the new paradigm of what it means to live as a Good Steward.

In him, in our baptism into him, we too are called to be Good Stewards. We too, start in the middle of things, in the middle of busy and demanding and sometimes difficult lives, in the midst of church challenges and struggles, in the midst of grief and joy, hope for the future and yet realism about our prospects.

Starting there we say, by coming to this table, “yes God, in and through Jesus, you have the power over the course of life and death.” “Yes we look at the Saints and see how you helped them create something wonderful from nothing, even from devastation.”

“And so we look with hope at those being baptized today; we will build the church for them, trusting that you will provide for them, being willing to get involved ourselves in their lives!”

Something from nothing, life from death. That is the presence we celebrate on this great Festival and in these great Sacraments. What will you do with your baptism? Will you invest it as a Steward, using your gifts, your talents and your treasure to make a difference? That’s the next question.