

Life in Death
John 11:32-44

Tucked tightly into our enveloping snowdrifts this week, it may be difficult to recall exactly which season we're in. So, if you will, try to think back to last week – or how you might typically picture autumn.

Having grown up in the comparatively lush northeast,

I tend to seek out the more garish displays of fall foliage:

vermilion and russet and eggplant,

and every other variation of reds, oranges and purples.

I admit that I am one of those transplants who simply couldn't see the beauty of Colorado's seemingly monochrome aspen-yellow.

Happily for me, the way I see the leaves all changed this fall.

Early in the season I took a quiet drive up and over Cameron Pass.

The first thing I noticed was the rich contrast of the aspens' yellow against green pine needles:

I finally allowed the beauty to soak in.

And so I chose to really **look** at what I was seeing.

Maybe you've had moments of realization like this;

epiphanies, where something familiar and ordinary

suddenly transforms into a meaningful, even holy, moment.

As I opened myself to the landscape before me,

I soon began to notice the many variations of **greens**

as the aspen leaves made their slow march toward gold.

I could discern lively, deeper jade from a brighter, almost neon flare.

And beside that vivid glow,

I could tell the subtle transformations

until they sparked golden fire.

For the first time, I was experiencing the beauty of Rocky Mountain fall;

a beauty I'd previously dismissed in search of my familiar maple and oak.

I was finally content that I didn't need any brazen pinks and oranges ...

and then I rounded a curve in the road,

and spread out on the mountain –

plotted against the myriad emeralds and golds –

stood gorgeous, rust-colored trees.

The unexpected new hue made me pause: **here** is what my eyes had been longing for ... or so I thought.

After a few moments of savoring them, I realized that these beautiful, rust-colored trees were not just another leafy addition to the mountainside:

they were pine beetle infested lodgepoles.

They were dying pine trees,

interspersed with still-living pines and aspens in all stages of life.

They were dead – and I had been reveling in their beauty.

My spirit began to war within me.

How could I ever perceive such destruction as beautiful?

Conversely: how could I deny the beauty made visible in these deaths?

I was stuck; feeling a bit betrayed by my own sense of awe.

And then I realized: the bright foliage that I was enjoying was also dying.

Those vibrant leaves that
entice us to tour the mountains each fall
would themselves fall to the ground, crisp and fragile,
and slowly decompose into earth's next layer.

The leaves I loved in their vivid hues were *dying*.

How do we hold these side by side:

the appreciation of such beauty alongside knowledge of impending or actual death?

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Jesus began to weep.

He began to weep even knowing that death would never have the final word.

He began to weep alongside Mary and Martha and the gathered crowd,  
even as he was prepared to stare death in its vacant eyes and deny it,  
disarm it of all its power to hold life hostage.

Even in the knowledge of life eternal,  
Jesus began to weep.

This is precisely what we do.

In the face of death, of loss, of pain: we grieve.

It is not **un**faithful to express sorrow.

If any living being had ultimate faith and hope, it was Jesus!  
And still he wept.

But he *didn't* do it without faith and hope.

This is the paradox I find in the beauty of deep-rust, dying pines against living greens and golds.  
It is lovely and sad.

It is also fearful,

because we simply don't know for sure what this change will bring.

We don't know what will happen to the Rocky Mountain forests  
as they continue to lose their lodgepoles;  
nor do we know what will come in the next seasons  
for their neighboring aspens.

We don't know what life after  
death's transformation will look like –

nor do we know how we will live on  
when those we love are no  
longer in life with us –

and so we being to weep.

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I love the fall. Each year I feel a deepening, this sense of longing that acknowledges the rightness of seasons turning; the beauty of it even as we let go of summer.

This year autumn seems to have come and gone way too quickly –
but in Colorado we are blessed that we get to experience the change of each season.

Our *spirits* are able to enter into life and death and renewal through seasonal symbolism,
even if our *minds* try to erect barriers against the pain such knowledge can evoke.

I know some people who do not attend funerals,
who do not attend this Totenfest service of remembrance
because they do not wish to talk about death when there is more living to be done.
And that is okay if it's where you are.

But I also offer the challenge of this story in John's Gospel:
the tension of embracing hope
while sometimes giving ourselves over to grieving.
Mourning does not negate the beauty of life;
and beauty does not erase the sadness of loss:
and so we weep even in the expectation of resurrection.
Even as Jesus stands before the tomb
preparing to shout, "Lazarus, come out!"
the tears have not yet dried on his face...
nor on Mary's or Martha's –
or ours.

Today in our Totenfest and All Saints' remembrance, we hold the tension of beauty and loss side by side.

We do not know what will be on the other side of change;
but we have hope – the hope that God reveals so miraculously in the seasons' natural cycles.

We know that we may weep freely with the Christ weeping beside us,
even as Christ reveals the wonder of new life.

We need not fear death's transformation – for ourselves or for those we have loved and lost –
*because God **still** refuses
to allow death the final word.*

This is the Good News.

May we know it by the beauty sensed in our deepest spirits,
and may our shared tears lead us to rejoicing in the promise of new life.
Amen.