

November 20, 2016 Reign of Christ and Thanksgiving Sunday  
“November’s Dark Beauty”  
Jeremiah 23:16-18, 21 & 22 Luke 21:5-19  
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There are probably few among us who would count November as their favorite month of year. In this month of November, the sunlight hours diminish, as does the force of the sun’s warmth. We have come to the end of the growing season-- not just the plants but even the animals, as they begin their months of hibernation, seem to disappear from the face of the earth. In Finland, November is called “Marraskuu,” which translates as “the month of the dead” in reference to the state of death that the natural world has moved into in its yearly cycle of decay. Curiously, I have also learned that the month of November is associated with philosophy and with the search for meaning.

This Sunday, Reign of Christ Sunday, marks the final Sunday of the Church year and next Sunday, on the first Sunday of Advent, our church year will begin anew. On this last Sunday, my thoughts have been circling around the soul’s experience of reaching the end of things. I turned to the great American poet, Robert Frost, for inspiration here. Frost, the author of the familiar poem, “The Road Not Taken,” has a remarkable gift of genius for painting a vivid landscape with his graceful verse. His poignant and simple descriptions connect the physical world around us with the spiritual world within us. In his poem, “Reluctance,” Frost takes the reader along with him on his walk through a November wood.

### **Reluctance**

Out through the fields and the woods  
And over the walls I have wended;  
I have climbed the hills of view  
And looked at the world, and descended.  
I have come by the highway home,  
And lo, it is ended

The leaves are all dead on the ground,  
Save those that the oak is keeping  
To ravel them one by one

And let them go scraping and creeping  
Out over the crusted snow,  
When others are sleeping.

And the dead leaves lie huddled and still,  
No longer blown hither and thither;  
The last lone aster is gone  
The flowers of the witch hazel wither;  
The heart is still aching to seek,  
But the feet question, "Whither?"

Ah, when to the heart of man  
Was it ever less than a treason  
To go with the drift of things,  
To yield with a grace to reason,  
And bow and accept the end  
Of a love or a season?

In Frost's poem, one senses the haunting beauty of November-- the bare charcoal colored limbs of the trees which reach into the steel grey sky. One feels the brisk wind and hears the lonely silence of a few lone leaves scraping against the brown earth on one of the last days of autumn. In my imagination I feel the vibrancy being sucked out of the world in the vacuum behind each gust of wind. It is as if a video in living color suddenly becomes a black and white film. As we search the landscape for signs of life, we are finally drawn back into ourselves-- warm blooded and colorful creatures bundled against the raw emptiness of our surroundings. We may lament the death of the natural beauty that only so recently surrounded us—the lush green and then the vibrant oranges and yellows—but now it is our task to yield to nature's greater order and purpose. To let go—or as Frost puts it, "to yield with a grace to reason, and bow and accept the end, of a love or a season."

November is ushered in with All Soul's Eve, continues with All Saints Day, and, finally, comes to a close with the Reign of Christ Sunday. In our nation and culture it also includes Veterans Day and Thanksgiving Day and this year a national election. These days of commemoration suggest something about what is happening in our physical

world and in our hearts and souls at this time of year. We look at the limbs of the leaf bare trees and if we sense life at all, it is only in the invisible life force within them, the sap that has withdrawn into the roots. The animals have retreated to their caves and hollowed trees and to the bottom of ponds and rivers. November's quiescence reminds us of the eternal law of balance both in the outer world of nature and in the inner life of the human being. It is a time of interiority. Now we must remember and take within ourselves what we can no longer see---those we have loved and whose lives have ended on All Saints Day, the lives that have been sacrificed to past wars on Veterans Day, the pilgrims meeting with the Native Americans in a peace that we know will not be lasting on Thanksgiving, and the growing awareness of the kingdom of Christ, on Reign of Christ Sunday showing the life of the Christian, not as one of glory and abundance but, paradoxically, as one of sacrifice and servant-hood.

Facing the end of life or of love, of joy or beauty, of our hoped for visions or for the warmth of a season, can be sorrowful but the sorrow holds a spirit of its own which cannot be as easily grasped when that life and love, joy, beauty, vision, and warmth, abundantly surrounded us. Why does sorrow often allow the mind to yield to the power of the imagination and memory? Why does it bring out a sinewy strength within us? Why does absence often make the heart grow even fonder? The lover whose beloved has rejected him now finds himself writing songs and singing with a depth he could never have reached before this loss. Why do we celebrate Thanksgiving in the grey days of November? It is more than the historical reason we all know well. There is certainly a soulful answer as well. The festival of harvest plenty is a ritual of abundance in a suddenly barren landscape. Our deep gratitude for God's abundant grace has to be taken even more deeply into each of our hearts where it can be sheltered in the cold months of winter ahead.

Frost has another poem, in which he imagines his own sorrow as a welcome visitor in this dreary season.

## November Guest

My Sorrow, when she's here with me,  
Thinks these dark days of autumn rain  
Are beautiful as days can be;  
She loves the bare, the withered tree;  
She walks the sodden pasture lane.

Her pleasure will not let me stay.  
She talks and I am fain to list:  
She's glad the birds are gone away,  
She's glad her simple worsted gray  
Is silver now with clinging mist.

The desolate, deserted trees,  
The faded earth, the heavy sky,  
The beauties she so truly sees,  
She thinks I have no eye for these,  
And vexes me for reason why.

Not yesterday I learned to know  
The love of bare November days  
Before the coming of the snow,  
But it were vain to tell her so,  
And they are better for her praise.

Sorrow, as a November guest, becomes a teacher and muse. Desolation and barrenness, darkness, and withering life bear a faded beauty-- an introverted Eros through which a quieter soul speaks and compels us to listen.

In today's passage from Luke, Jesus is preparing to face the end of his time on earth. He informs the disciples of the turmoil that will confront them in the days ahead. He is preparing them for these days as he warns them of the persecution they will face in his absence. And yet, he reassures them that he will provide them with the necessary words and wisdom when the time comes. These are the final teachings of Jesus before the feast of the Passover and the Last Supper. Their literalness, their historicity, and their immediacy have been interpreted widely in the 2000 years since they were spoken and recorded. The security Jesus promises his disciples is not a protection of their physical

being but of their spiritual being. This passage concludes with his promise to them, "...not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls." Yet we know that the disciples were martyred for their faith. Luke's portrayal of Jesus' promise of security shows just how real he saw the heavenly dimension of human life to be. These followers will die for their faith but their real being will not be lost. By their endurance they will gain their souls.

The days following the death of Jesus must have been dark ones for his followers. In the absence of the vital and steady presence of their leader, their faith faltered and fear rose within them. Their light had been snuffed out, and traumatized by grief; they were frozen in their uncertainty about what to do next. The winter of their faith suddenly faced them unmercifully. As time went on, the being of Christ had to be taken into the soul of each of them or it would be lost to all. As the color went out of their landscape they had to find its new home within themselves. The source of their courage, their understanding, their faith, their compassion would come from a spirit within. In their emptiness and sorrow in the wake of Jesus' death, they had to find their inspiration—in-spiration, literally, the taking in of the Christ spirit.

Earlier in Luke's Gospel, before his prediction of dark times, Jesus is asked by a Pharisee when the kingdom of God is coming, and he answers, "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, Look, here it is! Or, There it is! For in fact the kingdom of God is within you."

November's dimmer light and color calls us to our own inner light and vibrancy. Its deadened landscape challenges us to see how the absence of life around us is inviting us to trust the life within us. The festivals at this time, remind us that each earthly being has deep within, the spirit to commune with heavenly beings. The loss of sunlight is now balanced by a stream of spiritual light for those who acknowledge the invisible. It lights the way for us to see the inseparable natures of the physical and spiritual worlds-- two

faces of the same reality. November graciously offers this invisibility as its dull landscape holds a darker kind of beauty. November offers an invitation to seek God's splendor within. It summons us to feel these internal stirrings within the human mind, heart, and soul. Blessings on your November Days and Happy Thanksgiving.