

Easter When Autumn Leaves Fall
Revelation 21:1-6
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First Christian Church
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“It was the best of times. It was the worst of times.” But Dickens first sentences in *A Tale of Two Cities* are not only true of late 18th century London and Paris. They’re also true of the month of November.

November is the best of times: Crisp morning air that awakens the senses. Families gathering for Thanksgiving and reveling in the fragrance of hot turkey, dressing and pumpkin pie! The other day I heard someone say, “Thanksgiving is my favorite holiday.” I would agree. It’s the last calm day before “Black Friday” and the Christmas Rush begins. It’s a day of family reunions. Yes, November is the best of times.

And, November is the worst of times: Autumn leaves have fallen exposing naked branches. Gray skies dare the sun while longer nights foreshadow winter’s coming! Yes, November is the worst of times.

The worst day in our family’s life happened in November! On November 4, 1983, René was on the other side of Indy for a meeting. Phone rang. René’s youngest sister June was on the other end of the line. Bad news. Terrible news. Car crash. Their 29 year-old middle sister Pam, who was 8 months pregnant, and their 2 nieces, 8-year old Annie and 5-year old Amanda, our daughter Erica’s age, had all been killed by a drunk driver.

Immediately I started making arrangements to depart for Texas. Found a supply preacher. Called the church secretary, a few friends. Tried to get everything under control, when, of course, nothing was.

Finally, René returned. If someone else could have done the dirty deed, I would have gladly passed it on: But...“You’d better sit down. “I’ve got bad news.” Gasps. Tears. Disbelief. November is the worst of times!

November comes to everyone, sometime. Eventually, inescapably. Autumn leaves fall. Darkness comes. Death intrudes upon once carefree lives. Robert Frost captured this inevitability:

Eden’s first green is gold,
Her hardest hue to hold,
Her early leaf’s a flower,
But only so an hour,
Then leaf subsides to leaf,
So Eden sank to grief,
So dawn goes down to day,
Nothing gold can stay.

Dawn gives way to day. Autumn gives way to winter. Life gives way to death. Nothing gold can stay.

We wonder: Is this the end of the story? Is our destiny resignation?

When we’re faced with a tragedy of the proportions of René’s sister and nieces’ deaths, we’re forced to ask questions of God and our faith we can otherwise avoid. I’d seen terrible tragedies before: my college

roommate's death from cancer; a house we were living in burning down in the middle of the night.

A long time ago Old Testament patriarch Jacob's name was changed to Israel, which means "struggles with God." Seems Jacob and an angel of the Lord had a set-to. Sometimes I think that's all the Christian life is: one struggle after another; and that if a person or a church isn't struggling in some way they're missing the point.

But how to make sense of it? Five years before "the accident," I'd finished my Doctor of Ministry, in philosophical theology. It's a fancy title for contemplating the nature and meaning of the universe. My theology professor had lost a 10-year old son to terminal illness. If he had any wisdom on the subject of life and death I wanted to hear it.

Two things he said have stuck with me, as he reflected on his own Israel, his own November: "You never get over the death of one you love, but you do get through it." No denying November.

Then he quoted renowned philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, "Nothing beautiful is lost to God." This made me think of two of Jesus' teachings in Matthew: "*Let the children come to me and forbid them not; for of such is the kingdom of God.*" (Mt. 19:14) Surely if this were true, it also meant Annie and Amanda are in God's arms. Then I thought of where Jesus says, "*It is my father's will that my little ones should not suffer.*" (Mt. 18:14) I

already knew these “little ones” meant adult believers, not just children. For my money, it means God embraces all of us: no matter our age. WE are all God’s Little Ones! Pam is also with God! In the meantime, as René likes to say, “God gives us Christian faith and Christian friends to see us through.”

While at the funeral home, a young woman, meaning well, but tripping badly in her timing, came up to René and me and asked whether Pam and the girls were right with God? Like many a fundamentalist, the young woman assumed God’s always on the prowl for backsliders. You know, “*The road is narrow and those who enter are few.*” (Mt. 7:14) But I don’t interpret the scriptures the way most do. I don’t think God is out to see us burn in hell. I believe in God’s unconditional, unmerited, merciful love. God saves whatever is beautiful in us. Though I also believe that anything NOT beautiful to God, God discards! It’s God separating the wheat from the chaff in all of us. God encourages us to use our time here to rid ourselves of any ugliness that needs to be dumped.

All the same, as I thought of the young woman’s question, my heart rest in peace. Because I know and am thoroughly convinced that whatever is beautiful, whatever is noble, whatever is true, whatever is excellent is never lost to God and will never be lost to God.

And this isn’t just true of life after death, the “new heaven,” John of Revelation talks about. It’s also true in the life we lead right now when John

of Revelation speaks of a “new earth.” Because, you see, we share in God’s beauty right here. God always meets ugliness with beauty. God always meets evil with goodness. And not just in babies being born. Not just in leaves that radiate glorious color. Not just in snow-topped purple mountain majesty or in rainbow-hued grand canyons. God always returns our losses with gains. God always offers glory in the face of tragedy: in joyful memories, in showing us life isn’t an endless series of dead-ends, in giving us hope amid despair, in showing the world an empty tomb beyond a cross. You see, Easter comes even in November when autumn leaves fall. It’s why John of the Apocalypse can write in exile, “*I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.*” The ultimate victory, eternal Easter, belongs to God. *For this life* and not just the life to come! God is busy always blessing us with a new heaven *and* a new earth. Easter happens even when autumn leaves fall. Ask people in the southern hemisphere where Easter occurs not in spring, but in autumn!

But ours is not just to watch autumn leaves fall. Ours is to plant tulip bulbs as a sign of hope that God’s hope and beauty are with us always. Ours is to believe Easter comes in November. Because for Christians Easter was never meant to be only one day a year or only one day a week (viz. Sundays), but every day. Like an old Dutch fable told to children:

There were three tulip bulbs named *No*, *Maybe*, and *Yes*. They lived at the bottom of a bulb tin, content to be round and fat and clothed in their silky brown garments. When autumn came, they fell to discussing the destiny of tulip bulbs. *No* said, "I don't think there is any other life for tulip bulbs. Besides, I am satisfied with things as they are." So he rolled over in the corner to sleep the winter away. *Maybe* said, "I am not satisfied with things as they are. I feel that there is a better life than the life I now have. I feel something within me that I must achieve and I believe that I can achieve it." So he squeezed himself and squeezed himself and ended up in a fit of frustration. Then *Yes* said, "I have been told that we can do nothing of ourselves but that the good Lord will fulfill our destiny if we put ourselves in his power." So one day a hand reached down into the bin groping for tulip bulbs. *Yes* gave himself to the hand and was buried in the earth throughout the long winter months. Meanwhile *No* and *Maybe* shriveled away to nothing, but when spring came, *Yes* burst forth with all the richness and loveliness of new life.

"Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." (John

12:24) Easter comes to those who believe God can find us even in our deepest, darkest, Novembers when autumn leaves fall and tulip bulbs are buried.

Easter comes to those who believe that even death cannot prevent God from doing a new thing!