

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**
Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on November 11, 2018 (All Souls' Sunday)

If I really drag this sermon out, I'm reasonably confident I can still be speaking by the time the clock strikes 11:00 am. Or, as it's been known to generations, "the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month." It was at this moment 100 years ago that the armistice was signed ending World War I. The death totals from The Great War are staggering, well beyond what the human mind can even fathom. 16 million soldiers, sailors, and civilians were killed during the four-year conflict, with another 20 million injured, often in gruesome ways. It's difficult to comprehend the horror unleashed by the first full implementation of the modern military machine: tanks, flamethrowers, poison gas, artillery, and machine guns were all introduced or perfected to deadly precision in World War I. Not to mention the diseases that ran rampant in the trenches: influenza, typhoid, dysentery, cholera.

It's no wonder the end of the war was met with such unabashed joy and that Armistice Day has been celebrated throughout the world ever since as a symbol of peace.

I came across a story recently about an Episcopal priest in the small Central New York town of Oswego, who kept in touch with the local soldiers sent overseas during World War I. The Rev. Richmond Gesner was rector of Christ Church and he regularly corresponded with a small group of servicemen from Oswego, who found his letters a comforting reminder of home.

Corporal Arthur Ingram was one of "Gesner's Boys" as they came to be known. In one letter to Father Gesner, he wrote from France, "About half the time, I have been in the front line, sometimes not more than sixty yards from the enemy." He lamented that the "once beautiful wooded country" had turned into "a shelled, broken-up, muddy mess." And continued, "Not a twig on any tree is alive, but the one link we have with nature is the birds. . . . the more intense the bombardment, the harder they seem to sing. They just sound great in contrast with the guns. When I hear them, it seems like a promise of peace."

"A promise of peace." I love that phrase. Set against the terrifying sounds of war, of human beings destroying one another, the songs of the birds hold out the beautiful promise of another way. I'm reminded of the passage from the prophet Isaiah, "They shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more."

And the contrasting image of singing birds as a symbol of hope is taken up in the first stanza of the famous poem *In Flanders Fields*, written by a soldier after presiding over the funeral of a friend and fellow comrade in arms:

*In Flanders fields the poppies blow;
Between the crosses, row on row;
That mark our place; and in the sky;
The larks, still bravely singing, fly;
Scarce heard amid the guns below.*

As we mark All Souls' Sunday this morning at St. John's, Corporal Ingram's words are also a reminder that Jesus offers us all a promise of peace. For ourselves, for our loved ones, for our world.

It's not a promise that things will be easy. Or that everything will go your way. Or that life won't be full of challenge and adversity. But the promise of peace is a reminder that Jesus will be with you even to the grave and beyond. It is a promise of hope in the midst of despair; a promise of light in the presence of darkness; a promise of resurrection in the face of death.

Grief is a sneaky emotion. We may think we're over the loss of a loved one. The initial swirl of emotion has passed. The flurry of activity that marks the immediate aftermath of a death — the food, the planning, the friends dropping in — all fades. The looks of sympathy and words of comfort no longer come. The invitations stop and the assumption is that you've moved on; that life goes on; that time heals all wounds.

And yet grief can creep back into your consciousness when we least expect it. It may be triggered by a stranger's glance or a whiff of cologne or a change in seasons. It may be a sweet memory or a painful reminder of loss. But grief is also a marker that we remember, that we care, that the person we miss so deeply touched our lives in very real and meaningful ways. There is joy in the midst of grief, perhaps not when it's so raw, but in time we see it. In tiny glimpses at first but then in the attitude of gratefulness for having had that special person in our life for as long as we did.

This is where faith can play an important role. Frankly, I don't know how people face grief without it. The depth of despair must be unbearable. But faith is more than just wishful thinking. It may be comforting to think about your loved ones flying around the clouds strumming harps. But the life of resurrection is more than this. It is the blessed assurance that through faith in Jesus Christ, life is not ended but transformed into a larger life, where there is no pain or grief, but life eternal. This is the promise of peace.

One of those seemingly pie-in-the-sky ideas about death is that one day we will be reunited with our loved ones. In some cases this is comforting; in others, less so. But, again, this isn't just something we say to make people feel better. This is the promise of peace. St. Paul writes in his First Letter to the Thessalonians, the oldest book of the New Testament from which we read this morning, "Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord for ever."

The point is that this separation we feel from our loved ones who have died, is only temporary. And that one day, we will come face-to-face both with God and with those who have preceded us into the glory of the resurrection. This is the promise of peace.

Today we offer up to God all those for whom we pray but see no longer. In some cases, the open wound of grief remains raw. In others, we have come to terms with the loss. Usually it's somewhere in the middle. We often find ourselves along that continuum of deep wailing and acceptance. But in the end, grief is not linear. It dances and swirls and makes itself known in ways we least expect. If you are experiencing grief, be kind to yourself. If you are comforting someone you care about who is grieving, be understanding. But know that Jesus, the great comforter, remains with you. This is the promise of peace.

Corporal Ingram wrote that letter to Father Gesner more than two years before the armistice was signed. He was never to return to Oswego as he was wounded in France and died in an English hospital in 1917. But like all who die in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life, Ingram lived his life in that promise of peace. And like so many we meet along this continuing journey of life and faith, he points to something beyond the visible, to that promise of peace that passes all understanding.