

**Mount Hollywood United Church of Christ – Los Angeles**  
**Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost – November 1, 2015 – Communion**  
**All Saints Sunday – Pilgrimage to the Manger**  
Rev. Anne G. Cohen, Minister

**Wisdom of Solomon 3:1-9**

**REFLECTION**

**“To live in hearts we leave behind  
Is not to die.”**

~Thomas Campbell, "Hallowed Ground"

**“You think the dead we loved truly ever leave us?  
You think that we don't recall them more clearly in times of great trouble?”**

~ J.K. Rowling, Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban

**Sparks in the Stubble**

“Life is too big to walk it alone.” – “The Way” (2010)

In 2010 Martin Sheen starred in a film entitled “The Way”. He plays an American doctor, Tom, who comes to St. Jean Pied de Port, France to collect the remains of his adult son, Daniel (played by Emilio Estevez – his real-life son). The son has been killed in the Pyrenees in a storm while walking the Camino de Santiago, also known as The Way of Saint James. Dr. Tom chooses to take that pilgrimage himself in order to finish it for his son and to honor his memory. What he discovers – stepping out of his insulated life – is that what matters are the connections made with others on life’s journey. Everybody has “issues” – and we help each other deal with those issues – together – finding in our own flaws the answers to each-others’ questions.

It’s a simple movie with a simple message – and it has stayed with me – more so than most of the Mission Impossible movies I’ve seen. Part of what haunts me is the recurring image of the son – who continues to live in Tom’s memory – and, in a very real way, accompanies him on The Way. He has conversations with Daniel, more tangible to him at times than his actual walking companions – and he carries his son’s ashes as if to carry his body and soul with every step.

And then there is the fact that:

Emilio Estevez's [movie] "The Way" was inspired by his son, stars his father, is dedicated to his grandfather, and was written and directed by himself. – Roger Ebert

We walk in the company of generations – visible and invisible – each of us responsible for our own choices – but also for discovering the influence our choices have on those around us – those who follow us. That invisible rope of consequences binds us through time – from the day of creation into eternity.

It is exactly this – the real presence of our ancestors – older and younger – that is celebrated in the Christian Church on All Saints' Day – that is celebrated by cultures around the world – our most familiar being Mexico's "Days of the Dead..."

...referring to the Days of October 31 – November 2. October 31 is Halloween or All Hallows eve. November 1 is "el Dia de los innocentes" or the day of the children and All Saints Day. November 2 is All Souls Day or the Day of the Dead.

<http://www.unm.edu/~htafoya/dayofthedead.html>

Note that the children have a day – and the old ones have a day – the generations connected by those currently living and breathing – however long that may last. And the rituals of these days – tidying the graves, offering favorite foods to the souls of our loved ones, building altars, lighting candles – the rituals are the metaphors that allow us to look at our own mortality without dying of our fear of the unknown. The rituals teach us to trust our life-cycle, to feel the ongoing connection to life even in death – to become friends and travelling companions with Mystery.

The "Wisdom of Solomon", a teaching on the immortality of the soul – written in Egypt – in Greek – probably around the time of the anti-Jewish riots in Alexandria in 38 c.e. –

this Book of Wisdom offers us a glimpse into the metaphors our ancestors in faith used for these same reasons – to face death with some amount of equilibrium.

Although I personally don't believe in a G-d who "tests" us, I do believe that life itself can certainly FEEL like a test – a challenge to overcome – a series of obstacles (read pilgrimage) that show us our own courage and allow us to lean on the strength of others along the way. Hear these words and allow the images to come alive:

**...The souls of the righteous are in the hand of God...they are at peace...**

**Their hope is full of immortality.**

**...Like gold in the furnace [G-d] tried them, and like a sacrificial burnt offering [G-d] accepted them. In the time of their visitation they will shine forth, and will run like sparks through the stubble.**

**...The faithful will abide with [G-d] in love, because grace and mercy are upon [G-d's] elect, and [G-d] watches over [the] holy ones.**

The phrase “In the time of their visitation” refers to the apocalypse when the souls of the dead will shine like the stars. But that image goes even further:

**They will...run like sparks through the stubble...**

They will ignite the dry grass and harvested fields. They will catch fire in the hearts of wizened old bodies that have lost their strength. They will bring to life and light a world that has given up hope.

**They will...run like sparks through the stubble...**

This image came alive for me on pilgrimage at Burning Man. Each year a temple is built deep in the lake bed – beyond The Man – where pilgrims come to pray and sing, leave mementos and ashes of loved ones, get married, leave words of hope and encouragement and despair and loss. And on Sunday evening, after the sun has set, there is a migration out to encircle the Temple – to watch it burn to the ground.

There is a wind that is caused by the heat meeting the cool evening air – and the pale dust of the playa rises in ghostly whirlwinds of sparks and smoke – against a dark sky. There is power in the silence of the thousands of living souls gathered there, the palpable presence of spirits rising, the flames of the temple, the bagpipes and rushing air. Tears run through the dusty patina on faces moved in that hour to believe in the Mystery and the embrace of generations of souls.

David's father's ashes were taken to the Temple this year.

Laura's ashes will be taken to the Temple next year.

And they will run like sparks through the stubble – rising on whirlwinds of heat and smoke and the love of family and friends, parents and children.

They and all our “dearly departed” do not leave us alone.

They accompany us on this day and all days to come.

They inspire and comfort us, challenge and accept us, teach and respond to us.

They are with us always along The Way...

Offering Love and Light for the Journey...

And, in our own time, a Great Reunion –

in the House of G-d –

nestled among the Stars...

## Wisdom of Solomon 3:1-9

1 But the **souls of the righteous are in the hand of God**, and no torment will ever touch them. 2 In the eyes of the foolish they seemed to have died, and their departure was thought to be an affliction, 3 And their going from us to be their destruction; but **they are at peace**. 4 For though in the sight of men they were punished, **their hope is full of immortality**. 5 Having been disciplined a little, they will receive great good, because God tested them and found them worthy of himself; 6 **like gold in the furnace he tried them, and like a sacrificial burnt offering he accepted them**. 7 In the time of their visitation **they will shine forth, and will run like sparks through the stubble**. 8 They will govern nations and rule over peoples and the Lord will reign over them forever. 9 Those who trust in him will understand truth, and **the faithful will abide with him in love, because grace and mercy are upon his elect, and he watches over his holy ones**.

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"The Way" is a powerful and inspirational story about family, friends and the challenges we face while navigating this ever-changing and complicated world. Martin Sheen plays Tom, an American doctor who comes to St. Jean Pied de Port, France to collect the remains of his adult son (played by Emilio Estevez), killed in the Pyrenees in a storm while walking the Camino de Santiago, also known as The Way of Saint James. Rather than return home, Tom decides to embark on the historical pilgrimage to honor his son's desire to finish the journey. What Tom doesn't plan on is the profound impact the journey will have on him and his "California Bubble Life". Inexperienced as a trekker, Tom soon discovers that he will not be alone on this journey. On his journey, Tom meets other pilgrims from around the world, each with their own issues and looking for greater meaning in their lives: a Dutchman (Yorick van Wageningen), a Canadian (Deborah Kara Unger) and an Irish writer (James Nesbitt), who is suffering from a bout of writer's block. From the unexpected and, often times, amusing experiences along the way, this unlikely quartet of misfits creates an everlasting bond and Tom begins to learn what it means to be a citizen of the world again. Through Tom's unresolved relationship with his son, he discovers the difference between "the life we live and the life we choose".

- Written by "The Way"

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1441912/plotsummary>

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Emilio Estevez's "The Way" was inspired by his son, stars his father, is dedicated to his grandfather, and was written and directed by himself. It's a sweet and sincere family pilgrimage, even if a little too long and obvious. Audiences seeking uplift will find it here.

The story involves a California doctor named Tom (Martin Sheen), whose son Daniel dies while attempting to complete the Camino de Santiago (The Way of St. James), a centuries-old pilgrimage over Spanish mountain country to the Cathedral de Santiago. Daniel was apparently religious. Tom is definitely not. He flies to Spain to identify his son's body, oversees its cremation and decides on the

spot to scatter the ashes along the Way that Daniel planned to trek. In a nice touch, he even uses Daniel's backpack and hiking gear.

Daniel (Estevez) appears to him from time to time, in visions or imagination, as Tom rethinks their relationship. That adds a touching, buried level to the story, because in real life, Estevez and his father are making the same journey in order to make this film. Their relationship has been as loyal and healthy as possible, in contrast to the family outrider, Charlie Sheen, who one cannot imagine walking three steps along this path.

A two-hour film of a surly man walking alone is not a promising idea. Although he prefers to keep his distance from others, Tom finds himself journeying with three other pilgrims. The most entertaining is Joost (Yorick van Wageningen), a cheerful Dutchman, who Tom does his best to ditch but keeps turning up, undiscouraged. Then there is Sarah (Deborah Kara Unger), an unhappily divorced woman from Canada, who looks rich in a way that hasn't bought her happiness. And Jack (James Nesbitt), an Irish writer, who unfortunately embodies most of the garrulous jollity of the Irish and little of the wit and charm.

They are traversing beautiful country, which Estevez's camera employs without postcard excesses, and along the way, they of course encounter colorful locals and fellow pilgrims, have some small adventures and (inevitably) nearly lose the container with the ashes. At the end, Tom has arrived at some sort of reconciliation with his son and forgiven him for having undertaken the damn fool pilgrimage in the first place.

That isn't a lot to happen in a full-length film, and after a point, it begins to seem much of a muchness. Your response to it may depend on how receptive you are to the idea of the journey. Since both Sheen and Estevez are public about their Catholicism, I'm not sure what the point was of making Tom so firmly secular; perhaps so that even he, following so many centuries of footsteps, can sense some of their spirituality. "The Way" is a nice film. Not great, not urgent, but quietly positive.

<http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-way-2011>

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Celebrating The Day of the Dead has a long history in Mexican Tradition. The Day of the dead is celebrated on November 2nd. Sometime one hears reference to "the days of the Dead" which refers to the Days of October 31 – November 2. October 31 is Halloween or All Hallows eve. November 1 is "el Dia de los innocentes" or the day of the children and All Saints Day. November second is All Souls Day or the Day of the Dead.

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