

Lectionary column for All Saints Day: John 11:32-44

by [Heidi Neumark](#) in the [October 31, 2012](#) issue

To understand what I am going to tell you, you need to know that my parents were scientists and that my mother's mind had a decidedly unpoetic bent. Nonetheless, they read me poems from the time I was very young because they paid attention to what gladdened my spirit.

Near the end of my mother's life such gladness was mostly a thing of the past. She was living with us as we tried, inadequately, to cope with the ravages of Parkinson's disease. Her conversation took strange turns. Although her legs barely moved, her brain bundled her off on hallucinogenic journeys. Thankfully, she always came back and knew who we were. In fact, I regret that at times she saw all too clearly how stressed-out I was. "Are you writing?" friends would ask. "Are you crazy?" I felt like yelling.

In the final weeks my mother made a peculiar request. She ripped a page from a magazine she was paging through—she could no longer read much but she'd turn the pages. Then she asked Aura, the woman who helped us care for her, to tape the page to my bedroom door, up the two flights of stairs she could no longer manage. Aura told me this, indicating that she realized it made no sense, but she did it because of my mother's insistence. The ad my mother had torn out was for diamond earrings. Aura knew that I don't have pierced ears or crave expensive jewelry.

I climbed the stairs and stood at the door like Martha at the mouth of the tomb, expecting to find nothing except further evidence of a loved one's deterioration. There it was, the ad for diamond earrings. But I saw instantly that it wasn't about the jewelry. Below the diamonds, I read the shining letters, "Become a poet." A brilliant message on the threshold of death—you, beloved jewel of my heart, be who you are called to be, do what you are called to do. It was my mother's final gift to me.

The message was for me, but I think it reaches further. We all are called to create in the face of death, to spend our energies not in pursuit of expensive jewelry or other costly goods, but in multiplying good, following whatever path is right for us even when it's hard, even when we have to struggle through weakness of body and mind

and enlist the help of others, as my mother did to get that living word on the door.

Many churches will be marking All Saints Sunday on November 4. We will light candles in memory of loved ones whom we hold dear. We will join in prayer as we gather on the threshold of a presidential election. The lighting of candles catches us up in private memories and emotions, while the upcoming election takes place on a public stage. As Jesus comes to Lazarus's tomb, his living word addresses the range of our losses and longings.

Jesus weeps over the loss of his friend, but sadness is not the only emotion in the story. There is also a lot of anger. "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died," cries Martha, soon joined by the angry echo of her sister. Even the neighbors wonder why Jesus didn't do more. Here is room for the ragged edges of our real feelings and questions.

Too much room for some tastes. Mary and Martha are permitted their anger, but Jesus is not. We hear that Jesus was "greatly disturbed in spirit," but the original Greek states that he was boiling mad. Our translators have massaged Jesus' words like the handlers of a candidate who goes off script. When the early church fathers commented on the story of Lazarus they wrote that Jesus was angry at Satan, angry at the power of evil. "My rage is a cloud of flame," wrote the poet Marge Piercy. "A good anger acted upon is beautiful as lightning and swift with power . . . a good anger swallowed clots the blood to slime."

When we lose the anger, we also miss the connection between the two stories John tells in which good anger becomes the impetus for challenge and change. It was in the temple, when Jesus saw the money changers defrauding the poor, that his anger flamed and he picked up a whip to chase the cheaters away. As Jesus stands before Lazarus's tomb, he has come to the temple again, only this time it is the temple of Lazarus's body, being robbed of health and cheated of life. Jesus' handlers may have wanted him to swallow his anger, but Jesus acted on it, beautiful as lightning and swift with power. "Take away the stone," he orders. "It is too late," protests Martha, "by now there will be a stink."

There is a stink. If our TV sets were equipped with Smell-O-Vision, we would be hit with the stench of certain campaign ads. The cowardice, corruption and cruelty of many leaders stinks. A national landscape littered with the corpses of our highest ideals stinks. Parkinson's disease stinks. The death of our loved ones stinks. Some will believe with Martha that it's too late. Why bother? I made the same mistake on

the threshold of my mother's death, weary at the thought of climbing the stairs. I forgot the power of One who is able to call forth unforeseen possibilities—the healing of the nations, the wiping away of tears, the swallowing up of death. Jesus stands with us in the face of all that stinks. Come forth, he says, to pray, to sing, to vote, to labor, to love. Beloved jewels of my heart—come forth.