

“God is On the Side of Life” 4-2-16

Psalms 130

John 11:1-6, 11-28, 32-46

We have all been there. Someone we love is ill and dying. Face to face with death, how do we understand and make sense of it? I remember well the grief I felt when I was told my father would not survive the cerebral hemorrhage that took his life. One can read and explore how the great thinkers, religious texts, and philosophical traditions have understood death. But what is all of that when in the moment it becomes personal?

In our text Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha, is ill. They send a message to Jesus, as we would a call to a family member, “Lord, he whom you love is ill”. We write a request on a prayer card, sending a message to Jesus that someone we love or know is ill. As multitudes before us over the centuries, we instinctively reach out the hand to Jesus. We want God to know about our trouble and believe that Jesus can help. I pleaded with Jesus to spare my father’s life because he was just 59 and I was 32 and still loved, wanted, and needed my father.

In such a moment we grasp for any hope that we can. However, we recognize that death is universal. All living things die. Death is irreversible. Those we love who die do not come back to life. In that moment we are also faced with the existential element. I, too, will die.

As Jesus receives the message of Lazarus’ illness, he tells his disciples, “This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God’s glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified in it”. Jesus does an interesting thing at this point. We would get in the car or on the plane and rush to the side of the ill or dying family member. Not Jesus. He tells his followers, “Let us go to Judea again”. Of course, they are thinking, “What?” “Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?”

Back home, the expectation of Jesus’ arrival never materializes. Lazarus dies. We pray unceasingly for Jesus to show up and heal the person we love, but he doesn’t. Where is he?” Is prayer “a noisy clamoring for our own desires?” I can share my own stories of pleading, arguing, and doing everything possible to move God to comply with my will, or, as one person framed it, “to wheedle the All Wise out of his blessed will and into ours” (IB, vol, 8, p.638).

Calvin talks about the prayer of “suspended desire”. As we wait and wait for Jesus to respond while only the silence speaks to us, we begin to ask if God has another plan. Is God trying to bend my will to God’s will? Paul petitions the Lord, writing to the Corinthians, “Three times I appealed to the Lord about this (what he describes as his thorn in the flesh) that it would leave me” (2 Corinthians 12:8). He, too, experienced only God’s silence.

After a time, Jesus turns to the disciples and says, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him”. God’s timing and ways are not our ways. The disciples take him literally, “Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right”. It is then Jesus tells them bluntly; “Lazarus is dead”. By the time they arrive at the home of Martha and Mary Lazarus has been in the tomb four days.

Trust is a big issue in being a follower of Jesus. It is in any relationship. I trust Jesus cares about me and is fully aware what I am facing in my life in any given moment. As a parent who understands a child's proclivities and immature leanings, I trust Jesus is taking my concern and request seriously and will respond accordingly. It might be in a way that I don't like causing me to protest. However, if I remain open and in conversation much growth and learning will result.

We can sympathize with Martha's response in this light. 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died'. She follows up with a confession stating what we would as we confess one of the Christian creeds; "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day". The conversation continues, Jesus affirming, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live. Do you believe this?" She offers mental assent again, as Christians do standing around the grave of a loved one. She is probably numb from the grief of Lazarus' death. Perhaps she is angry at Jesus, blaming him for her brother's death which he could have prevented had he been there as she stated. But, as F. W. Faber puts it, "He never comes to those that do not wait" (IB, p.640).

When disappointing events happen in our lives we often question the whereabouts of God. We think of Cho, the young man who gunned down the students at Virginia Tech on April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2007. He felt no connection to his classmates or love for them. Where was God? (Yancey, 'Grace Notes', p.136).

Yet God was there and met those who were open to God's presence in the face of such death and tragedy, just as Jesus is present to Mary and Martha. In grief we discover love and pain converging. Jesus is moved. Hearing the question one more time, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died". "Lord, if you had been here, those students would not have died". "Lord, if you had been here, my father would not have died". Jesus is deeply moved by our grief, regardless of the loss. "Where have you laid him?" he asks. "Come and see, Lord". John tells us at this point that "Jesus began to weep". So the Jews observed, "See how he loved him!" But others asked, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

We ask the question, does God stand in the midst of our losses and suffering, weeping with us? Lent is a reminder of the pathos of God we witness in the face of Jesus. This is truly God as Immanuel, God with us. We might ask why Jesus would weep knowing the impending miracle he was about to perform. This is no dispassionate, removed God who comes into this fallen world of ours. Here is no capricious Greek God, come to mingle with us, throwing thunderbolts at us, sometimes helping and sometimes hindering us, indifferent to our feelings and demanding that we placate the divine, yielding to its power.

My sense is that Jesus was weeping over the human condition. He felt the suffering of a refugee torn from a home, children going from lack of food, seniors having to choose between drugs and food, immigrants torn from their families by deportation, innocent people murdered unjustly, all those things which may afflict our lives. Everyday God feels the brokenness of so many human hearts, identifying with the suffering and pain and loss that we all experience. "In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death..." (Hebrews 5:7).

I have had moments when, for no reason, I am overwhelmed by the brokenness and suffering and loss that this life imposes upon us. I have had the experience described by A. B. Davidson; "Do you ever, without any special reason for grief, fall into uncontrollable weeping? The other day that came upon me in great strength. I was alone; and there came such a sense of the mystery, the uncertainty, the loneliness, the pathos of life, that I was for a long time shaken with sobs which I was unable to control" (IB. p. 646).

In grief, love and pain do converge. Here in Jesus we see into God's heart and mind and nature. We witness his compassion, the depth of his love for our needy lives. It is not a condescending love. This is a picture of how God actually bears himself with us. It is this which draws us to love God and humanizes us, the cross Jesus bore and the profound forgiveness and reconciliation it effects.

Standing within the stench of a body before an opened tomb, Jesus says, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" The stone being rolled back, Jesus says, "Lazarus, come out! Unbind him, and let him go".

After twenty years in prison and now elected president of South Africa, Mandela asks his jailer to join him on the inauguration platform. He then appoints Archbishop Desmond Tutu to head the designated Truth and Reconciliation Commission. It is his way to defuse the natural pattern of revenge. The rules are simple. If a white policeman or army officer voluntarily faces his accusers, confesses his crime, fully acknowledging guilt, there could be no trial or punishment for the crime. Mandela insisted that the country needed healing.

An officer named van de Broek comes forward and recounts shooting an eighteen year old boy and burning the body. Eight years later he returns to the same house and seizes the boy's father. The wife is forced to watch as policemen bind her husband on a woodpile, pour gasoline on it, and ignite it.

The judge asks the woman, who is standing before the man, "What do you want from Mr. von de Broek?" She says that she wants him to go to the place where they burned her husband's body, gather up the dust, and give him a decent burial. Head bowed, the policeman nods agreement.

Then she adds, "Mr. von de Broek took all my family away from me, and I still have a lot of love to give. Twice a month I would like for him to come to the ghetto and spend a day with me so I can be a mother to him. And I would like Mr. von de Broek to know that he is forgiven by God, and that I forgive him to. I would like to embrace him so that he can know my forgiveness is real".

The courtroom explodes in singing 'Amazing Grace' as the woman makes her way to the witness stand. It is told that von de Broek does not hear the hymn, but faints, overwhelmed (Yancey, p.278).

As Jesus has Lazarus unbound physically that day and let go, so too we share in the unbinding of others by standing with them in their grief, assisting the victims of famine and injustice, being vehicles of God's love to all who are bound by sin and death. As we do we bear witness to the power of God's glory and love at work within us, affirming that God is on the side of life.

"In the end, his will, not ours, is done. Love is the victor. Death is not the end. The end is life. His life and our lives, through him, in him" (Buechner, "The Magnificent Defeat", p.81).