

Sermon by Lex Breckinridge – 3/29/20

Fifth Sunday in Lent

Ezekial 37: 1-14

John 11: 1-45

I had a dream the other morning, and in my dream, I was talking to my dad. Now, Dad died in 1913 so it certainly was a dream. I heard myself saying, “Dad, what was it like?” “What was it like?” My dad was born in January 1913 so he would have been 6 or 7 when the Spanish flu pandemic ravaged the world, killing at least 50 million people. In the U.S. alone, 28 million people were infected and 500,000 died. Many of us have seen the pictures. Hospital wards packed. People in the streets wearing masks. Social distancing being practiced nearly as rigorously as I hope we are all doing today.

My dad never did answer any questions. But I’m sure it shaped his character in some way, as world historical events do. I was looking for some connection, some wisdom from my dad. I know he had some – actually, he had plenty of wisdom – but I’ll have to wait until he and I are back together again in God’s Nearer Presence to find out.

So, in this present world historical moment, Zonnie and I are encouraging our two oldest grandchildren who

are aged 10 and 8 to write down something every day, just a paragraph, about how their day has gone, what's been on their minds and on their hearts. Our hope is that they'll be able to look back and remember. And, then pass their memories and their learnings and their wisdom on to their children and grandchildren.

And that brings me back to my dad and the conversation I wanted to have with him. Some of the wisdom that I wanted my dad to share with me had to do with grief. My dad was acquainted with grief and loss. He buried two children, my brother and my sister. During World War II, he claimed the body of his youngest brother Shunk, a 1st Lieutenant killed in the Battle of the Bulge. He buried much loved nieces and nephews - children tragically killed an accident. And he buried another brother and a sister. So, I wanted my dad to tell me something about grief because, let's be honest, I and most of us are experiencing grief and loss right now. And let's continue to be honest, for many of us, this may be just the beginning. On Saturday, Zonnie and I lost a dear friend, one of our priests from our church in New Orleans when we were younger and with whom we stayed connected. He was a loving pastor, a wonderful teacher, a passionate social justice activist and a great role-model for us. Losing him hit us hard. We do need to be honest.

Of course, each of our stories is different; each story as unique as the human being living it. And for some of us, maybe most of us, there will be questions like this: “Why is this happening to me?” “When is this going to end?” “Where is God in all of this?” I can imagine myself asking those questions. And it seems, I am not the only one.

We hear their warning from the Prophet Exekiel who imagines Israel in exile in Babylon as lifeless, windswept and eerie. A valley of dry bones. The prophet says, “Son of Man, these bones are the whole house of Israel.” Israel replies, “Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.” Israel felt hopeless and lost.

Hopeless and lost is exactly how Martha and Mary felt when their brother Lazarus died. When Lazarus got sick, Mary sent word to her friend, Jesus, asking for help. But even though he loved Mary and Martha, we’re told, he delayed coming to them. When he finally showed up, Lazarus had been dead for four days. And then Martha and Mary each say the same thing to him. “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” And their questions are asked as tears of grief and loss and hopelessness are flowing. Their grief troubles Jesus and we’re told he was “greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.”

And then, what in some translations becomes the shortest sentence in the whole Bible, we are told, “Jesus wept.” Jesus wept. Think about that for a minute. Jesus wept. In the midst of their overwhelming sadness, their loss, their pain, their suffering; in the midst of their frustration with Jesus for not *doing something*, in the midst of every predictable human emotion in times of tragedy and death and disruption in our lives, we are told, “Jesus wept.”

Do you see how important this is? In the shortest sentence in the Bible we learn something of the most profound cosmic significance. We learn that God suffers. We learn that God grieves. We learn that God suffers when we suffer; that God weeps when we weep. We learn that we never suffer alone.

In times of mourning and grief and loss, what we most long for is to be known in our grief. When grief feels as if it’s overwhelming, when we feel as if we can no longer bear it alone, what we long for is to have someone or many someones hold our grief with us. And now we know that God holds our grief with us. And God holds our anger and our frustration with us as well. “Where were you, God? If you had been here, my brother would not have died.” “If only you had been here, God, ...[fill in the blank].” In my imagination I see Martha and

Mary beating their fists against Jesus' chest. "Where were you?" And Jesus holding them tenderly, lovingly, with great strength - and weeping.

God in Christ holds all our grief. And God in Christ holds our anger and our frustration and our doubting and questioning that are so often a part of grief. God in Christ is big enough to hold it all and to weep with us as we weep.

Now, if that were the end of the story, we might say to ourselves how grateful we are that the Creator of all that was and is and ever will be is joining us in our losses. After all, there's nothing like a good friend who can be in complete and total empathy with our suffering. Yet, if that were the end of the story, nothing would be changed. But that's not the end. There's more. Jesus, still greatly disturbed in spirit, comes to the tomb, calls for the stone at the mouth of the tomb to be rolled away, and then says in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out." And, lo and behold, he does. Blinking in the sunlight, stinking to high heaven, Lazarus comes out.

This is the last of the seven miracles, or signs as John puts it, in John's gospel, which are meant to show the way God works in the world. And the story of the raising of Lazarus points us forward to another very short sentence

that we will hear two Sundays from now. “He is risen; He is risen; the Lord is risen indeed.”

The story of the raising of Lazarus points us forward to another story. Another story of tragedy and grief and mourning and loss. And like the story of Lazarus, it’s a story that ends with life. An ending with cosmic significance. An ending that tells us clearly and unmistakably, that God enters our suffering with us, God holds our suffering, God hears our suffering, and in the end, God takes our suffering, redeems it, and brings out of it all new life. It’s as if our tears – and Christ’s tears – water the earth that brings forth new life.

And so, my dear sisters and brothers, we’re called to stand with each other. To be Christ for each other, just as we welcome Christ into our own hearts in the midst of our own grief and loss.

Our hope – our faith – is that out of all this suffering and loss and frustration and grief and fear, eventually – in God’s good time – new life will emerge. The Book of Common Prayer says in the burial liturgy, “Life is changed not ended.” And God is in the midst of it all.

So. Let these two short sentences from the Bible feed you and those you love today, tomorrow and in the seeks

and months and years to come. “Jesus wept.” And, “He is risen; the Lord is risen, indeed!”

Amen.