

Jn 11: 32-34

WEEPING, WIPING AWAY TEARS

“Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

“Lord, if you had been there, my mother would not have suffered so much.”

“Lord, if you were here now, I wouldn’t be having such a hard time.”

“Lord, if only you would come; if only you would show up....”

When have you cried out to God, looking for comfort, listening for a word of hope, longing for peace? When, in your life, have you accused God of being far away at a difficult time? When you lost your job or your house, when a brother died, or a dear friend was taken seriously ill, or a parent was injured, or a significant other turned away from you... When, in such circumstances, have you looked for comfort or listened for a word of hope or longed for peace?

What do you do when you discover that a loved one has a life-threatening illness, when you experience infertility, when your wife tells you she wants a divorce, when you just can’t live through one more day? You and I cry out to God, don’t we? When we are looking for comfort, listening for a word of hope, or longing for peace, we whisper to God, or we yell at God or we accuse God of having abandoned us. When we are ill, when someone we love is ill, when there is a terrible accident, when we lose a job, when someone we love is dying, we cry out to God: “Lord, if you had been there...” “Why weren’t you there? Where did you go? Why did you abandon me?”

Theologians have a label for these responses to tragedy: “Lament”. In noun form, it means “a passionate expression of grief or sorrow”; in verb form, it means “to mourn”. When we cry out to God about something that is painful or unjust or unbearable, we are lamenting. We are letting God know that we are displeased or disturbed, disappointed or in despair. Of course God already knows how we feel, but lament gives us an opportunity to open our hearts to God. In lament, we call on God to show up and get us through whatever we are going through.

The Bible contains many examples of lament, both individual and communal. One whole book of the Hebrew Bible, our Old Testament, is called “Lamentations”; it’s a collection of laments. But by far the largest collection of laments is in the Psalms. Here are some of them.... Psalm 44: You have rejected us and abased us; you have made us the taunt of our neighbors, the derision and scorn of those around us. Psalm 80: O Lord God of hosts, how long will you be angry with your people’s prayers? You have fed them with the bread of tears and given them tears to drink in full measure. Psalm 85: Will you be angry with us forever? Will you prolong your anger to all generations? Psalm 87: O Lord, why do you cast me off? Why do you hide your face from me? And Psalm 22, which Jesus cried from the cross: My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer, and by night, but find no rest... The Psalms give voice to our lament as we cry out to God.

Last weekend, we heard the tragic news of the murder of eleven Jews who were gathered for Shabbat services in Pittsburgh on Saturday. We heard much less about the hate-motivated murder of two African-Americans in a grocery store in Louisville, after the shooter had failed to enter a local church with his weapons. We cry out to God on behalf of those who are enduring these tragedies. How can we respond except to lament, to cry out to God for justice and healing in the midst of so much pain?

You and I know that, in this beautiful world which God has given us, there is much suffering. Every day, someone is experiencing mourning or crying or pain. Every minute, someone is suffering from illness or violence, and someone is dying, somewhere. When we are suffering—or when we bear another’s suffering, in body or mind or spirit, we lament; we let God know that we are displeased or disturbed, disappointed or in despair. In lament, we call on God to show up for us--and for those we love—or those we have never met who are in crisis—through whatever we or they are going through.

Sometimes, though, especially in our darkest moments, it seems that God does not show up. It seems that, when we are bearing our heaviest burdens, God is not with us. In those times, it’s not only the suffering itself which fills us with displeasure or disappointment or despair; it’s also the realization that, if God had been there, then God could have done something about the situation—but that God was not there and did nothing. Or at least it feels that way. In those times, we lament that God doesn’t seem to care enough to show up—or that God does show up but does no mighty work among us.

In our funeral liturgy, it is common for the pastor to read this verse from I Corinthians 15: “Where, O Death, is your victory? Where, O Death, is thy sting?” When I read those verses, usually at a graveside service, I think first, “Yes! Jesus has triumphed over death; Jesus has the final victory! Death has no victory!” But then I turn to lament, “I know that death doesn’t have the final victory, but it seems like it does right now. I know where the sting of death is. It’s right here, right at this grave, piercing the hearts of those gathered around this coffin.”

When have you felt the sting of death? When has death shown up unannounced or long awaited and stung you? As a community, King of Kings has felt the sting of death since All Saints’ Sunday last year when we lost Mike Saathoff, and then Katie Hayes, and Erna Skulevold and Wayne Miller. Maybe you, too, have felt the sting of death in the past year, when you lost a sibling or a neighbor or a dear friend. Or maybe you felt death’s sting when you saw news about the 17 teens shot dead at their high school in Parkland, Florida last March or the 30 people who lost their lives to Hurricane Florence last month or the more than 20,000 children who have died in civil war in Syria since 2011. Whether death is near to us or far, whether it is anticipated or unexpected, whether it is violent or peaceful, it stings.

Jesus, too, knew the sting of death. We know that when John the Baptist was beheaded, Jesus went away to begin mourning. We also know that he grieved the loss of his friend Lazarus. In today’s gospel reading, we read that, when Jesus drew near to the home of Lazarus and his sisters Martha and Mary after Lazarus’s death and saw Mary weeping, “he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.” And how did Jesus respond? John tells us that “Jesus began to weep.” In the KJV translation, we read simply that “Jesus wept.” The Greek text, however, means, “Jesus began to weep, and he continued weeping.” Jesus, like us, knew the sting of death, in weeping that begins--and continues.

Not only did Jesus know the sting of death. He also, like you, like me, knew the sting of God’s absence. Jesus understands what it’s like to wonder if God has abandoned you when you are sitting in the doctor’s office wearing a ridiculous smock and hearing bad news or standing in the kitchen telling your husband you lost your job or sobbing on the telephone upon hearing the news that a friend’s baby has died. Martin Luther called this experience of God’s abandonment or absence “the hiddenness of God”, describing the unbearable loneliness of those moments when you can’t see—or hear—or even believe in God anymore. Jesus experienced the hiddenness of God when he was hanging on the cross, and he borrowed the words of Psalm 22 as his lament: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Have you ever cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Have you ever felt death’s sting? Have you ever wondered if God has abandoned you or if God will ever show up?

While I was a student at Luther Seminary, I felt death’s sting when I miscarried a ten-week old fetus. I couldn’t even pray. When I returned home from the hospital, it was time to put three-year old Irene to bed. I asked her to lead our bedtime prayer, and she said, “Thank you, God, for Mama’s baby that’s gone from her tummy. She’s very sad. Amen.” I felt death’s sting that night. I felt forsaken. I felt abandoned. And then, I cried and I cried and I cried. For weeks, I wept, and I wept again, and I wept some more. I thought that I would run out of tears, but I never did. My first prayers after that miscarriage were prayers of lament, wordless prayers, prayers composed of tears instead of words.

Have you composed prayers of tears? Have you felt death’s sting? Have you cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Maybe you are looking for comfort or listening for a word of hope or longing for peace today. Maybe you are bearing a heavy burden at home or at work or in your family. Maybe you are feeling abandoned by God; maybe it seems that you are in the midst of a cruel game of hide and seek with the Lord God Almighty, who is bound to win. Maybe the moment you are in now is the darkest moment of your life. Maybe you are “greatly disturbed”, as Jesus was at Lazarus’ grave.

If so, might you come to God with an heartfelt lament, even though God already knows how you feel? Might you open your heart and bring your displeasure or your disappointment or your despair directly to God? Might you cry out to God in words--or in tears? Might you begin to weep, and weep, and weep some more? And, weeping, might you notice Jesus, right next to you? Jesus, one hand resting gently on your shoulder, and the other wiping away your tears, Jesus, right here, weeping with you. AMEN.