

November 3, 2024

Grief and Hope

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Mary opens our gospel text this morning with a comment that comes to many of us in times of despair: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” (vs. 32)

Whether it’s at the loss of a loved one, like Mary lost her brother, or at times of great strife and devastation like the damages caused by recent hurricanes, or the horrific violence in Gaza, we are wont to question both God’s power and presence in our world

“God, if you had been here, this wouldn’t have happened.”

The text goes on, immediately after Mary’s question, to illuminate a truth about our God that both startles and comforts us: “Jesus saw her weeping, and the [townsfolk] who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.” (vs. 33)

Ginger Barfield, a Professor of Biblical Studies and Theology, notes that “this translation [of the Greek in vs 33] is too weak. The first verb,” translated as “greatly disturbed in spirit” “has a connection to anger. It is not simply a strong feeling, but it is more of a passion and pain that comes from anger at the situation”¹

“The root of the second verb,” translated as “deeply moved,” “is tied to a stirring up of oneself on the insides. It can be used in a physical sense for stirring up water, disturbing the calmness of the still water. In a more personal sense, it signifies both mental and internal disturbance that is akin to almost being physically sickened and disturbed.”

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/all-saints-day/commentary-on-john-1132-44-4>

Jesus wasn't just "greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved" – Jesus was gut-punched, devastated, angry, sad, wrenched with emotion

And these are not the emotions of a prideful man who cannot believe someone would question his power and presence, as some have wanted to translate Jesus' emotions in this text

Rather, what this sentence in this morning's gospel illuminates for us is that "even the incarnate God is broken in his heart and soul by the death of his friend Lazarus. Death grieves God." Dr. Barfield writes. "So also, does death break our hearts and stir up our souls."

In response to the death of his friend, Jesus wept

In response to the deaths of our loved ones and in response to the devastation to creation and humanity we experience in today's world, Jesus weeps alongside us

Sometimes in the church's efforts to show just how magnificent our God is, we have turned God into a superhero: the one who can do all things, is in all things, and controls all things

And, in doing so, we have risked distancing our God from one of the greatest superpowers they possess: empathy

In telling us this story this morning about Jesus and the death of his friend, John reminds us that when Jesus came into this world to break open God's kin-dom on earth, Jesus did not come with some sort of super-human power to sanitize and sterilize the world

Rather, Jesus came into the world and experienced it fully - grief and all

And, in doing so, Jesus sanctified our lives and experiences by becoming our companion and our comfort

John goes on to tell of one of the greatest miracles performed by our Lord: “Jesus said, ‘Take away the stone.’ Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, ‘Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.’ Jesus said to her, ‘Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?’ So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, ‘Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.’ When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, ‘Lazarus, come out!’ The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, ‘Unbind him, and let him go.’” (vs. 39-44)

The power and presence of God never left Jesus and it never prevented him from experiencing grief

When Jesus arrived at his friends’ house and he saw the sisters and their friends weeping, Jesus could have laughed, scoffed at them and said “why do you cry? Ha! Watch what I can do!”

The power and presence of God never left Jesus and it never prevented him from weeping

Maybe saying that the other way around is just as important: Jesus wept and Jesus embodied the power and presence of God

Jesus wept, and the promise of resurrection is still present

When I was in college, I had a wonderful pastor remind me that faith and doubt are two sides of the same coin - both held in the palm of our hand and in God’s

I wonder if there isn’t another coin in our purse whose two sides are grief and hope

We certainly have held this coin, have we not?

I think most of us here have experienced a loss that has caused us grief, perhaps we are in the throes of it now

We hold this coin

And, when the grief side is facing us, I'm not sure we realize that hope is on the other side

But this is exactly what John's gospel story tells us this morning and this is the promise and power of God – that there will come a day when the coin flips and we experience the hope, we experience the resurrection

The neat thing about the image of the coin, is the reminder that the two sides are always present – one side doesn't fully negate the presence of the other, one side doesn't hold more value than the other

Our grief never fully goes away – as we recall our saints during the service today, we might feel, as Jesus felt, "greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved," I know I do and will

And, as Christians our hope never fully goes away either – we name our saints in the trust and assurance that they have entered that nearer presence of God and dwell in the wonderful mystery that is God's eternal love

When our grief is tied not to the physical death of a loved one, but to the "deaths" we experience in the world today like the devastating effects of hurricanes and the terrible violence of war, as Christians we believe, and I tell you it is something I must work hard to believe, that hope is still the other side of the coin

And not a passive hope where crossing my fingers and shaking my head are all I can muster, but a participatory hope where our voices, our actions, our prayers, our votes take on a tangible shape and impact

God coming into our world, into our lives, didn't and doesn't sanitize and sterilize the world from harm, from death, from doubt, from grief – God coming into our world sanctifies our journeys and promises hope, faith, and resurrection

Our world wants us to dwell only on the positive side of the coin – grief is something to get over, and please do it quickly if you don't mind

But the church, our faith, the gospel is a space where we hold the whole coin – experience the fullness of life, both faith and doubt, grief and hope, with equal weight, and equal understanding

And, please note, I'm not saying that each of us individually needs to enter the church with all of those feelings in balance – what an impossible task

But, I do think, that upon all of us entering this space there will be someone in grief and there will be someone in hope, there will be someone in doubt and someone in faith – we draw on and we need each other, and our other companion in this space is Jesus

I don't know about you, but I desperately need a space that can hold all of these aspects of life and not a space that asks me to mask or hide, sanitize or sterilize my human experience

Thanks be to God that Jesus “was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved” by the grief of his friends and community, me too

And, let us hear the power and promise of God over and over: “Come out! Unbind them, and let them go!”

Amen.