

Sacred Depths

A sermon on Psalm 130, Ezekiel 37:1-14 & John 11:1-45 by Nathan Nettleton, 26 March 2023

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Message

Grief and suffering bring us close to the heart of the suffering God and can open us to God's transforming and resurrecting power.

Sermon

Most of us feel a bit awkward and unsure around people who are grieving deeply, shattered people whose hearts are breaking. We often feel like we should have something appropriate to say, but we don't know what it is. We feel out of our depth. Grieving people often report feeling quite alone with their grief because, in our awkwardness, we often tiptoe around them or even avoid them completely. We hope that someone better qualified is looking after them.

Let me assure you that even those of us who are pastors or counsellors or medical professionals often don't feel any better prepared or any more confident that we know what the right thing to do or say is.

As a preacher, I can't always know who among my hearers are carrying what griefs, new or ongoing. So when, like tonight, I come to preach on two scripture readings about God restoring dead people to life, I have no way of knowing quite what lingering griefs may be triggered. Stories of dead people being raised to life are not necessarily comforting to those who have just lost a loved one and know that they are not about to get them back.

Twelve years ago, these readings came up the day before we held the funeral for Sarah and Phil's baby Alice, who died at birth. At least I knew, but that didn't make it easy to find something meaningful to say without being insensitive. I could hear the late Athol Gill's voice in the back of my head saying that any theology that cannot be preached in the presence of a grieving mother does not deserve to be preached any other time either.

As I did then, I want to take my cue from the psalm tonight, and use it as a way into the stories of Ezekiel in the valley of bones and the raising of Lazarus by Jesus.

"Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord. Lord, hear my voice!"

Quite a few of the psalms start in a similar place, a cry from the depths of grief, of despair, of suffering, of hopelessness. It is a place that is by no means foreign to the biblical writers and especially not to the psalmists. Some others that start similarly describe a feeling of sinking deeper and deeper and feeling sure that they are going to go under and drown in the sorrow, never to rise again.

I want to take this as a way into the other two readings, because although the emphasis naturally falls on the miraculous resuscitation of Lazarus and on the resurrection of the crowd of skeletons in Ezekiel's vision, that is not all there is to either story. In both there is a place of grief and despair that comes before the new life, and I think it is fair to say that we don't really get a handle on what the promise of new life is all about until we have entered into that previous place.

In Ezekiel's vision, this place is described quite explicitly. The Lord says to Ezekiel, "These bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.'"

As we journey through this season of Lent, the feeling of foreboding becomes stronger and stronger. For those who are close to Jesus, the feelings of being cut off and without hope close in on them oppressively. But it is also true that these feelings described in the vision of the valley of death are common to many of us at all sorts of times, and to some of us much of the time.

I think it was Benjamin Franklin who once said that many men die around the age of 25, but are not buried until they are around 75. Many many people are living as though death has already claimed them, and they are just marking time, waiting for it to finish its job. Not all of them look glum all the time. Some of them look like the most joyous hedonists, throwing themselves headlong into every loud, boozy, distracting bit of pleasure-seeking they can find, but for many, that is just a desperate diversion from the emptiness and hopelessness and pointlessness that is gnawing away at them from the inside.

I still remember a man I met on SCUBA diving trip many years ago. He was telling me how he used to be a teacher, and he had really believed in teaching and got a lot of joy and fulfilment out of making a difference in young lives. But at some point he had succumbed to a need for more money to service a bigger mortgage and a more extravagant lifestyle, and he quit teaching and went into business and made a lot of money. But the frightening thing listening to him talk about why this was the right thing to have done was that there was something dead in his eyes as he talked about it. There was no passion in his descriptions of what he did now. It was just about money. And something that once fired him with enthusiasm had died. Something that made him truly alive had withered and died. He was a rich skeleton in the valley of death. "They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.'"

That memory comes a bit close to the bone for me at the moment, no pun intended. I don't think I'm in any danger of walking away from my job in search of riches, but I am grieving some complex things that have me worried that the fire might be similarly dying in my eyes. The recent decisions by the Baptist Union to not care any more about being Baptist have me grieving a loss of family, a loss of home. But the struggle over those decisions also confronted me with some unpleasant realities about myself and my inability to find a way to engage in such discussions that doesn't result in those on the other side feeling attacked and humiliated by me.

Eight months of therapy has me understanding the problem better, but not feeling much closer to finding a way out of it. And that in turn hooks into my increasing anxieties about the fragmentation of our world and ways we are breaking back into hostile tribes that refuse to listen to anyone outside and demand unquestioning orthodoxy inside, because I realise that if those who disagree with me end up feeling attacked by me, then I'm part of the problem. I don't want to be part of problem, but I feel helplessly trapped, and that leaves me scared and deeply grieving the loss of my optimistic image of myself as part of the solution. I'm not suggesting for a moment that any of that is comparable to the grief of parents who have lost a child, but it is the grief I'm carrying as I look to these stories.

The story of the raising of Lazarus that we heard tonight went for 45 verses, and it was not until verse 43 that Jesus said, “Lazarus, come out.” Most of the story actually plays out in the place of grief. And perhaps the most important thing for us to note is that even though Jesus apparently knows what he is going to do, he is still caught up in the grief.

The gospel writer describes him as being “greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved” and as weeping. The words used suggest more than just sadness. There is a sense of anger. How could this happen? Why do good people suffer and die? How can death be allowed to wreak havoc in a world that was created for life? Variations on these angry questions are almost universally present at times of loss and grief. Why? Why? Why? And there are no good answers.

But I think that this little glimpse into Jesus’s experience of grief in the face of the death of a loved one points us in a very important direction. Although God is unmistakably and unequivocally the God of life, God is by no means a stranger to deep grief and sorrow. And as this gospel writer tells us repeatedly, when we see the Son, we are seeing the Father. What we see in the Son, is true of the Father too. When we see Jesus disturbed and moved and angry and weeping in the face of suffering and death, we are seeing into the heart of the God who is Father and Mother of us all. We are seeing into the mothering and fathering heart of the God who knows only too well and only too personally what it feels like to lose an only child to death.

At the cross, not only does Jesus enter into the experience of being hated and cast into the jaws of death, but God enters into the experience of being a heartbroken parent who helplessly watches an only child snatched away by the powers of death. There is no depth of grief that is unfamiliar to this God. There is no suffering or pain that can take us beyond the reach of the understanding and compassion of this God.

The further we fall into grief and pain and anguish, the deeper we are immersed into the very heart of God. To collapse into sorrow and tears is to fall into the everlasting arms of God whose sorrow is fathomless and yet whose love is undiminished. I know it usually doesn’t feel like it, but that is where it takes us, whether we can recognise it or not, and usually we can only recognise it in hindsight.

In the midst of it, it usually feels like no such thing, and all we can do is wait. Feel it deeply and wait. As our psalm said, “I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope; my soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning.” I’m holding on to that in my own grief and anxiety at present – my soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning – because I don’t really have anywhere else to go with it, and I’m now old enough to have a few past experiences of eventually not being disappointed when I waited on God through a time of anguish and disorientation. It is a beautifully evocative image: waiting in darkness through a long night, longing for a morning which seems to take for ever to come.

But this place of weeping and waiting in the depths of sorrow is a deeply sacred place. Not an enjoyably sacred place, but a deeply sacred place. It is sacred firstly for the reasons I have just described: it is a place almost inseparable from the heart of God. When we enter this place, we enter a place where God is. A sacred place of divine grief in the very heart of God.

But it is sacred too because it is a place where God is active, a place where God is doing new things. The experience of deep pain and grief strips us of all our delusions and pretences. It pulls away all the false crutches we lean on and the false masks we hide behind. It leaves us open and vulnerable. That's why we are so reluctant to go there. But it is also why the Holy Spirit can so readily reach us there.

Whether we are able to be aware of it or not, it is a place where, if we have the courage not to flee, the sacred connections between our own hearts and the heart of God can be renewed and new seeds can be sown to bring new life and hope and meaning. There is no resurrection that is not preceded by the horror of death and the plunge into the depths of grief. For it is there that the work of new life begins.

In a few moments we will be coming to the Lord's Table, a place where the risen Lord holds out his wounded hands to embrace again the suffering of all who cry out from the depths. Here he offers us his own brokenness and calls us to journey with him into his own wholeness.

The whole journey is symbolised in this meal, but over the next few weeks we will be symbolising it even more dramatically as our Lenten journey moves into its final weeks. Next Sunday will confront us with the the ironic joy of the palm procession as Jesus enters Jerusalem, painfully contrasted with the reading of the long passion story as the darkness engulfs us and takes us into the final journey to the cross and the deep sorrow of Friday. And then there will be the strange waiting of the Saturday, a waiting that these stories have pointed us to, and hopefully prepared us for. A waiting that some of us know only too well. A waiting that can come to any of us at any time. A waiting in an unwelcome but holy place.

I wait for the Lord, my soul waits,
and in his word I hope;
my soul waits for the Lord
more than those who watch for the morning,
more than those who watch for the morning.