

**“God Cries with Us”
John 11:32-44**

Sunday, November 7, 2021 – Rev. Alex Creager

³³When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. ³⁴He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." ³⁵Jesus began to weep. ³⁶So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" ³⁷But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" ³⁸Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. ³⁹Jesus 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." ⁴⁰Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" ⁴¹So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. ⁴²I 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." ⁴³When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" ⁴⁴The 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."

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

This past week I finally got around to reading a book that had been on my bookshelf for years. It is a book called *Lament for a Son* by Nicholas Wolterstorff. If you haven't ever read it, I highly recommend you do so. It's a very short book. If you are a fast reader, you can do it in an hour. If you are a slower reader like myself, you can still do it in 2 to 3 hours. It is a book you will not regret reading.

Wolterstorff is a Christian theologian who taught at Yale Divinity School for years. He has written many books, but this one is his most personal. "Lament for a Son" is a series of journal entries he wrote after the sudden death of his own son Eric. Eric was only 25 years old. His son was living in Munich, working on a thesis on European architecture, when he died one summer day mountain climbing. It was horrific. When he got the phone call telling him his son had died and he had to come pick up the body, Wolterstorff writes that all he could feel after that was pain – "cold burning pain."

In the months that followed he writes about what was helpful and what was not. What did not help him was a culture that says especially to males: Don't cry. Be strong. Keep it buried deep down" He was strong, but the crying is what allowed him to be honest. Telling him not to cry told him to pretend that things were different than they were. It was a lie to not cry. It dishonored the love he still had for his son.

What he also found to be very unhelpful were either people trying to explain to him why God would allow this suffering, words like “God wanted to call Eric home.” Or people telling him “It’s not really that bad,” minimizing his loss. That was the worst.

Wolterstorff writes,

“Death is awful, demonic. If you think your task as a comforter is to tell me that really, all things considered, it’s not so bad, you do not sit with me in my grief, but place yourself off in the distance away from there. Over there, you are no help. What I need to hear from you is that you recognize how painful it is. To comfort me, you have to come close. Come sit beside me on my mourning bench.”

Wolterstorff believed very much in the hope of resurrection and new and everlasting life in the Kingdom of God. But that didn’t take away his pain. He missed his son Eric here and now. “There’s a hole in the world,” Wolterstorff writes.

What finally helped him the most was the ancient practice of lament. It was crying out and telling God his pain. It was confessing his regrets and wishing for more time. It was allowing himself to be angry and sad and honest with God. It was doing what the psalmists and prophets and Jesus did, but which we as the church often find too awkward or uncomfortable today. It was remembering Eric and the love he still had for his son, and the pain it causes, and knowing God wants to hear it and know it all. And that God is in the middle of it. Not just the hopeful, sunny parts. But the painful, dark, grief filled days too.

Through that lament process Wolterstorff discovered a depth to God he had missed before:

“God is not only the God of the sufferers, but the God who suffers [with them] ...to redeem our brokenness the God who suffers with us did not strike some mighty blow of power but sent his beloved son to suffer like us, through his suffering to redeem us from evil. Instead of explaining our suffering God shares it.”

That is what Wolterstorff needed most of all. Not an explanation. Not a grand theory. Not some words of piety or someone saying don’t feel bad. But to know that he wasn’t alone. To know God was with him fully. That Eric’s life mattered just as much to God as it does to him, and that God would “sit beside me on my mourning bench.”

The readings for this morning are both from the lectionary for All Saints Day. The first one, from Isaiah 25, is one of my favorite passages, and I often choose it for Easter Sunday. It gives this great image of death being destroyed and a delicious feast waiting for us. As you get to know me, you will discover that I love to feast, eat and drink, especially with friends and family and great conversation. And so this image is one I treasure.

But it also includes another image. Of God wiping away tears. That’s a powerful image. It’s a close, intimate act of God touching our cheek in the midst of loss. And another reading for All Saints Day, Revelation 21:1-6 includes that same image too.

“God himself will be them. He will wipe every tear from their eyes.”

That seems about as close as we could imagine the Creator of heaven and earth ever getting to our grief and loss and human pain. But in our gospel reading from John we get an image of God going even closer to us. Jesus weeps. His friend Lazarus has died. He will rise again, soon. But right now, he is dead. And his sisters Mary and Martha love him and miss him, and feel that terrible pain that Wolterstorff did. And so does Jesus. Because Jesus loves. Fully loves. And grief comes from continuing to love those who are not with us anymore.

Jesus doesn't just wipe away Mary and Martha's tears. He joins them in sitting and crying, and grieving this loss. It's a short verse, one of the shortest in scripture. "Jesus wept," some translations say. But that image tells us so much about God and God's love for us.

On this Sunday, All Saints Sunday, we remember those who have passed before us. We remember their lives and gifts, love, and presence. We witness to the hope and good news of resurrection and life eternal.

But today, we are also called to do something else. We are called to know that in the midst of our love, our loss, our grief, our pain, we are not alone. The God of heaven and earth, the Creator of this vast universe, the one who breathed us out of dust and into life, that God sits with us at the mourning bunch, not only wiping away our tears, but crying with us. Because God loves. And love brings tears.

So know that in all those times you continue to love and miss and grieve and be in pain you are not alone. God is there with you. God is ready for all your tears, all your rage, all your questions. You may not get the explanations or answers you are looking for. But you will find love. You will find God. You will find you are never alone. That is our good news.

Our challenge is to also sit sometimes at the mourning bench. Wolterstorff said that some of the best help he got from friends was when they came to him and said, "I don't know what to say, but we are here with you in your grief."

If we want to be people of love, of support, of those who live like Jesus, then let us also cry and be present like Jesus. When we have family or friends or neighbors or church members going through loss or grief or pain, we don't need to explain things. We aren't called to minimize the pain. We may not need many words at all. But simply be present, Be there next to them. Offer an embrace. Share in tears. Ask about memories of love and joy and life. Because in that we find the true love of the God who came to earth to be one of us, and shared in everything, even our tears.

Amen.