

King of Glory Lutheran Church April 1-2, 2017

Lent 5: John 11:1-45 "God Weeps"

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God weeps over us even when we get stuck in our own tombs or choose them. God weeps.

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. The sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." But when Jesus heard it, he decided to stay two days before going to visit. The disciples were confused about why Jesus wanted to return to the area where people had just been trying to stone Him. Jesus said, "Lazarus is dead. Let us go."

When Jesus arrived he brought a bouquet of flowers and a lovely sympathy card. Both Martha and Mary told Him, "If you had been here, my brother would not have died." Jesus said. "I am the resurrection and the life. Show me where the tomb is."

The women took Jesus to the tomb. All three walked in respectful silence up to the stone. The sisters began crying. Jesus didn't. The sisters were confused by the Lord's demeanor. Jesus had been a guest in their home. He was Lazarus' friend. But today, Jesus just seemed unaffected by Lazarus' death. In fact, He raised His hands and began praying.

"Holy Father, we thank you for Lazarus' life. We were blessed by his presence. He was a good and faithful brother to Martha and Mary. He was a friend to me. Dear Abba, receive him into your presence on the last day and comfort this family with your strength and love. Amen."

Not a tear. Not a wavering of His voice. Nothing. Martha and Mary were so perplexed. Like a stranger just coming to offer condolences, Jesus turned and left. It made them hurt all the more. They watched Him walk down the dusty road and they clung to each other in pain, their sobs echoing against the rock tomb.

Have you ever experienced God like that? God seems to not show up when we need God, coming only after the fact to pray a proper prayer and then leave again. No comfort. No answers. No support.

Thank the Lord and the writer of this Gospel the story doesn't end this way! Not at all! Any pastor can tell you that the most famous memory verse for Confirmation students is contained in this text. Why? Not for any theological reason, but only because of its length. "Jesus wept." Or "Jesus began to weep."

But I want us to grab a Kleenex box and sit with this verse for a minute. It has huge theological implications for us. Jesus began to weep. Don't miss it. Let's not run so fast to the tomb to see the crazy amazing miracle and Lazarus waddling out from the tomb that we miss Jesus' tears.

I know that when we women get upset we most often cry and you men most often get angry. But if you can, think back, all of us to a moment that made us cry. We feel the tears begin to well up. They fight their way over the tops of our eyelids like water seeping over the top of a dam. Little streams of water fall down our cheeks or gush out suddenly as we are overcome with emotion.

This chapter in John is a full expression of Jesus' humanity and His divinity. The raising of Lazarus is meant to demonstrate Jesus' power as the Christ, the Savior. He even says to God, "I know you hear me, but I'm saying this for the crowd's sake that they will believe in you!" We learn that Jesus stays away several extra days because in Jewish belief, the soul leaves the body after three days. By the time Jesus arrives, Lazarus is truly dead. It's been four days.

But to the sisters, His delay only adds more heartache.

Then we see Jesus' begin to get upset. The same Greek word used to describe His intense feelings is used when Jesus knows His hour has come and when He is telling the disciples not to be troubled at Jesus' death. It's a word that describes intense emotion.

We know that emotion, don't we? We've known it when we get the phone call that Mom has died. Or our nephew is using drugs again or our daughter won't leave her abusive marriage. We've cried those kinds of tears at the tragic death of a young person. It's the lament that leaves us gulping for air.

What does it tell us that God who is the Resurrection and the Life, cries at human grief and death?

Rev. Terence Fretheim, writes about God's suffering in one of his books. God's lament over God's people, and fighting nations and even for creation itself, is clearly evident in many Old Testament books. In Isaiah we hear God mourning over Moab. "My heart cries out for Moab. Therefore I weep with the weeping of Jazer...I drench you with my tears. My soul moans like a lyre for Moab and my heart for Kirheres." (Terence Fretheim. *The Suffering of God; An Old Testament Perspective*. Fortress Press. Philadelphia. 1984. Pg. 132-133.)

God feels this heart-rending distress and in this example, they aren't even Israelites. Yet when God introduces judgment, God then weeps with people. We see God with a depth of pain that enters into the relationship God has with humanity and creation.

So back to Jesus. What makes this scene more powerful is that we know Jesus loved His friends. Martha had been hostess getting a meal on the table for the Lord. Mary sat at Jesus' feet learning from Him. Lazarus was a friend that Jesus loved. There is a connection of love between Jesus and these individuals. They represented human love that sustained Him during His earthly ministry.

Being part of a Divine Family didn't mean that nothing bad was ever going to happen. Lazarus got sick. Then he died. Following Jesus doesn't secure for us a trouble free life. We are humans on an earthly journey.

Following Jesus also does not mean that God will always 'save us in our time of trial.' Martha and Mary had no idea why Jesus delayed coming. There wasn't a cell phone with a quick text. "I have business, I'll be there on Wednesday." For them, that absence only meant another ocean of grief.

We too don't understand God's ways. "Where was God?" we ask. "God could've fixed this." "If you were here, my brother would not have died." Indeed it is true that the Lord of Life can do anything. But we can only see a tiny microscopic amount of what God is doing in the whole of our lives. What we don't see through our tears at the funeral is how God will bring the lost sibling back into the family because of Mom's death. What we don't see sitting at the bed in the hospital after the 6th round of chemo is how God is working spiritually to bring peace to a soul in the midst of physical pain. And what we cannot see are God's tears – God's suffering with us.

The fully divine Jesus knew He was going to bring Lazarus back to life. He told the disciples what was to happen. But Jesus sees Mary crying. He sees her neighbors and friends crying. He gets upset. Perhaps He identifies with Lazarus reflecting on His own upcoming death. Maybe He just needs to cry. God weeps with us.

Unfortunately there are plenty of people we know that get stuck in the tombs of their lives and God sheds tears for them. They cannot find their way out of the dead places. Real life gets sucked out of them as again and again as the darkness feels more safe than the light. Some choose it. Others cannot help it. Mental illness. Disease. Unhappy marriages. Refugee status. Waiting for legal papers. Having the 'wrong' color of skin. Stuck between war zones, hiding alive but barely living. Dying for lack of clean water and food. Unable to forget that one sin that God has forgotten decades ago. Unable to choose the light or not having the option of light, tombs get easier and easier to live in. And for that God sobs. Can you hear Him? Jesus is upset. Angry. Disturbed. Troubled. Worried. Distressed. Agitated. Concerned.

Lazarus had been in the tomb four days; long enough to be dead. His grave clothes were beginning to stick to his decaying body.

Some people and perhaps some of us, after three days we get unpacked. After four days in a tomb we begin hanging pictures. We move in the most comfortable arm chair. The TV reception isn't great, but hey we could get Wifi for a few extra dollars. The tombs of our lives are easier, better, more comfortable than facing the light and reality of true life and true love.

But Jesus is standing outside. He's weeping. Can you hear Him? Now He's leaning against the rock using His robe to wipe His runny nose.

Don't miss it.

When Jesus arrived he brought a bouquet of flowers and a lovely sympathy card. Both Martha and Mary told Him, "If you had been here, my brother would not have died." Jesus said. "I am the resurrection and the life. Show me where the tomb is."

The women took Jesus to the tomb. All three walked in respectful silence up to the stone. The sisters began crying. Jesus did too. They had never seen their Lord like this. He began to moan. It was a kind of sound like a coyote who has lost its mate. Jesus' vision become blurred and His face twisted up in pain. The sisters were so comforted by the Lord's demeanor. Jesus had been a guest in their home. He was Lazarus' friend. Today, Jesus just seemed just as affected by Lazarus' death as they were. In fact, He raised His hands and began praying.

"Holy Father, we thank you for Lazarus' life. We were blessed by his presence. He was a good and faithful brother to Martha and Mary. He was a friend to me. Dear Abba, receive him into your presence on the last day and comfort this family with your strength and love. Amen."

Well that's a better ending, isn't it? But it's not quite right yet.

In two weeks' time, we'll hear Jesus' distraught cries again. Good Friday is just around the corner. He's going to cry for all of us. He'll cry in His own pain and for our painful sins. He'll invite us to consider opening the rock door to our tombs just a crack. Or if we're brave and trusting we might just redecorate our tombs with windows and an open door and play the Alleluia Chorus. And Jesus will have grace if we choose not to or cannot. Then He will enter all the tombs of time. There is no dead place where God has not been and where God is not. God suffers when we suffer. Jesus will wail and sob and moan for all dead.

Don't miss His tears. Because it will be one heck of a Resurrection! Amen.