

“Why Did Jesus Weep?”

John 11:17-37

Sermon series: Who Do You Say That I Am?

All Saints’ Sunday

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Answer: Jesus, the human

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The Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard once told the story of a prince who goes out riding through his field one day when he notices a peasant girl gathering the crops.

She is beautiful, and the prince falls instantly in love with her.

However, he is a noble prince
and does not want to overwhelm her with his power and riches,
so he dresses in peasant clothing and goes to work side by side
with this young woman.

Kierkegaard notes that what holds our attention in this story is our curiosity about when the prince will reveal his true identity.

We know they will fall in love—
but how and when will this young woman discover
that she in fact loves a prince?

Without knowing the ending, our imaginations start to run.

Will they be sharing a picnic lunch one day when the prince cannot stand it any longer, ripping back the peasant clothes to reveal purple royalty underneath?

Will it be more dramatic—their wedding day—
when the prince’s true identity becomes known?

Or will they be married for 50 years, and then in old age the prince will disclose who he really was and what he gave up for her?

Kierkegaard uses this story as a way of describing how lots of Christians view the person of Jesus.

Many Christians picture Jesus, says Kierkegaard, as the prince in disguise, the one who cloaks himself with human emotions, in human form—
but he knows all along that he's got purple underneath.

And it's just a matter of time before he reveals his true identity,
his divine form in the resurrection.

Kierkegaard's point with this story, however, is that Jesus is not at all like the prince.

Jesus is not pretending to be a real person.
He is a flesh and blood person.

He's not fooling people with his humanity.
Jesus *is human*, on the outside, and on the inside.¹

This tension between the divinity and the humanity of Jesus...it is an age-old tension for the church.

And it shows up today in our text from John.

At first blush, our story for today appears to be all about JESUS IN HIS PURPLE GARMENT, Jesus the divine.

We only heard the middle of the story, but the beginning and the end of the story are no less important.

In verse 4, John tells us that when Jesus heard that his friend Lazarus was sick, Jesus replied: "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it."

Now what kind of a response is that?
It's a divine response, right?

¹ This story is told by Stanley Hauerwas in "Why Did Jesus Have to Die?: An Attempt to Cross the Barrier of Age," as printed in *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin*, July, 2007.

Jesus, all-knowing.
 Jesus, in control.

Jesus has this mysterious knowledge from the very beginning of the story, and he's confident that Lazarus will be just fine.

- In fact, Jesus is so confident that when he hears about Lazarus' illness, Jesus decided to *stay two more days* before departing to go see Lazarus. (v6)
- Then after our text for today, Jesus approaches the tomb containing his dead friend, and he cries: "Lazarus, come out!" And Lazarus is no longer dead. And Lazarus comes out. (v43-44)

It's Jesus in his ROYAL GARMENT, if you will.
 Nothing you and I could ever do, raising someone from the dead.
 Only the divine Jesus could do something like this....

All of which may make you wonder why I chose this text
 when our focus for the sermon this week is **not** Jesus the divine,
 but Jesus, the human.

And yet...if you look in the middle of this story, you will find a verse that gets at the very heart of what it means for you and me to be human.

Our text today contains the shortest verse in the Bible.
 Do you know what it is?

John 11:35, KJV... "Jesus wept."
 The NRSV translates the Greek: "Jesus began to weep."

Now think about it...those are mysterious tears.
 Why did Jesus weep?

- If Jesus knew that Lazarus would be ok, why did Jesus weep?
- If Jesus knew that he would have Lazarus back to his old self by the end of the day, why would Jesus cry?

Why didn't Jesus just say to Mary and Martha and everyone there—NOW, NOW...NO NEED TO CRY. You thought what I did with the water and the wine was good? Well...watch this!

But all that confidence and control—it just seems to VANISH in verse 35.²
 And Jesus wept.
 So why did Jesus weep?

Our Thursday morning Bible study had some wonderful ideas for why Jesus cried. One person suggested that it was the lack of faith that others had in Jesus and what he could do—that they still didn't get that Jesus could overcome even death itself, and so Jesus wept because he wanted them to understand.

That could be it.

Another suggested that when Jesus saw everyone else crying, he was caught off guard by their tears—and it surprised Jesus, and the moment overcame Jesus...that could be it as well.

I recall when something like that got hold of me. When I was 12 years old, my grandmother died, and I flew out with my mom to California after my mom got the call.

My dad couldn't go right away.
 Someone had to take care of my one-year-old brother, so I went.

And I put on a BRAVE face.
 And I greeted my aunt and uncle at the airport, and everyone was crying, but I didn't cry.

And I watched my brother while my mom attended to business throughout the next day, and I didn't cry.

And my mom would check in with me, ask how I was doing—
 I'm fine, I'd say, I'm doing fine.

² My exegesis of this part of the text is heavily indebted to a discussion by Dr. Fred Craddock in his book *John*, part of the Knox Preaching Guides (John H. Hayes, editor), Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982.

And then after a couple days,
 it was just my uncle and me in the room,
 and he asked how 7th grade was going, was I playing baseball?

As I started talking about my baseball team, after maybe 10 or 15 seconds, I couldn't talk about my baseball team.

It just hit me. I started bawling, overwhelmed by the loss of my grandmother.

That's how it works sometimes, right?
 When the defenses are down, and you don't see it coming...

Maybe that's what happened to Jesus.
 Maybe his defenses were up at first, and when he saw everyone in tears,
 he finally broke down himself.

Could be it...but I think there's another possibility.

Let's take a closer look at what triggers the tears.
 Jesus asks, "Where have you laid him?"
 And the response is: "Lord, come and see."

And it's at THAT MOMENT that Jesus wept.
 Jesus wept when he heard the words, "Come and see"...

Come and see.

Those are important words in John's Gospel.

1. Back in chapter one, when Andrew and Simon start to follow Jesus, they say, "Rabbi, where are you staying?"—

Jesus replies, "Come and see."

2. When Philip tells Nathaniel about Jesus, and Nathaniel says, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"—

Philip replies, “Come and see.”³

Come and see is an invitation to discipleship in the Gospel of John.

It’s a CALL.

And instead of speaking those words, Jesus *hears* those words today.

With the words, “Come and see,” Jesus is called...

not only to bring Lazarus OUT of the tomb.

but *called to enter his own tomb*.

You see, this is not just a story about Jesus giving life back to Lazarus.

It’s ALSO a story about Jesus giving HIS LIFE for the world.

In verse 53 of chapter 11, we learn that it was this event—the raising of Lazarus—that prompted the religious authorities in John’s Gospel to plan to put Jesus to death.

Jesus knows, at this moment, perhaps like he’s never truly known before, that his path will lead to the cross. And that’s the reason, I believe, for the tears.

Because Jesus loved his life and treasured his life,
and sometimes he had, in all his humanity,
the same struggles in life that you and I have as well.

When I was going through the ordination process, I was sitting before the Session of my home church, ready to be approved to move on to the next stage, to become a candidate for ministry.

And they were happy, and I was excited, and frankly, most of what they said to me went in one ear and out the other.

It was like that until one father on the Session spoke up.
I didn’t know him well, but I knew of him.

He was middle-aged,
had a wife and kids,

³ Ibid.

but sometime after I left that church to go to college,
 one of his kids—someone a few years younger than me—
 was in an auto accident.

This father's teenage boy was driving his car,
 and the car got stuck on some railroad tracks,
 and this teenager was killed by the oncoming train.

It was, needless to say, a SHATTERING event for that family, to lose their
 17-year-old in a freak accident.

This father looked at me on that evening that I came before the Session to be
 a candidate for ministry.

He said, "Ben, I see a lot of me in you."

"You're goal-oriented. You like to work. You like to get things done.
 You've had success in your life, and I don't doubt that you'll have a lot more."

Then he paused, put his head down,
 and when he looked up he said to me:

"Ben, don't forget to take time to stop and smell the roses."

Now I don't remember 95% of what I was taught in seminary.
 But I remember that.

That father wasn't just telling me to pay attention to the roses.
 That father was reminding me to pay attention to God.
 He was inviting me: "Come and see..."

Saints, I think, are like that father...
 people who have learned how to pay attention to God,
 how to follow God faithfully,
 through the heartaches and struggles of life.

Do you know anyone like that?

Someone who taught you how to pay attention to God amidst the ups and downs of life?

Or someone who simply paid attention to you when you needed it, when the rug had been pulled out from under you?

Someone who understood God's calling in their life,
 to be the sharing of God's grace and God's love
 ...and one of the people with whom
 they shared that love and grace was you?

I'd like to invite you to do something.
 In the pew racks in front of you, you will see small stacks of white cards.

At the top of each card is a verse from the Apostle Paul:
 "I thank God for my remembrance of you."

Let me invite you to take one of those cards during worship today.
 You don't have to do anything with the card at this moment.
 But let me invite you to take it with you when you leave today.

When you go home today, set aside two minutes, or five minutes, or fifteen minutes on this All Saints' Sunday, and consider someone in your life who really paid attention to you.

Who taught you about God's love and grace.
 And then put that person's name on your card.

You're allowed to put more than one name, of course.
 Put two names. Put ten names.

And keep the card.
 Keep that list of names.

In fact, the next time you do the laundry, make sure that card doesn't accidentally end up in the laundry.

And the next time you move, I don't care what you leave behind—

just make sure you take that list...
because to you, it's not just a list.

And when your ministry in this life is over,
and you leave this world,
let me invite you to take that card with you.

Because when you get to meet Jesus—
(I don't know how it works, but I know all of us will meet Jesus)...

When you get to meet Jesus, Jesus just might tell you that you came into the world with nothing, and you've got to leave it with nothing, and he'll ask you what you have in your hand.

And you'll say, "Well, it's just some names."
And he's going to want to see it.

And you'll say, "Well, it's just some names, people I lived with and worked with and they helped me along the way."

And he'll say he wants to see it.
And you'll say, "Well, it's just a group of people who, if it weren't for them, I never would have made it."

And Jesus will say, "I want to see it."

And you'll give it to him, and he'll smile, and he'll say, "I know these people. I know them all. In fact, on my way to meet you I passed by a few of them.

They were painting a sign.
At the top, it said, "Welcome Home."

And just below that...was your name.⁴

Amen.

⁴ This illustration is adapted from a story found in *Craddock Stories*, by Dr. Fred Craddock, edited by Mike Graves and Richard Ward, St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001.