

“A Diet of Tears”  
Psalm 42  
Second Sunday in Lent

February 28, 2021  
Westminster, Greenville  
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A little more than a decade ago, when I was at the funeral for my wife’s grandmother—we knew her as Mama Joy—at her funeral, there was a solo sung.

It was a solo of a well-known hymn, one of her favorites.

I had never heard this hymn. I do not remember ever hearing this hymn in the Presbyterian Church in which I grew up in Michigan. Which says a lot more about my own memory and musical limitations than it does about the hymn.

The hymn was this:  
“It Is Well with My Soul.”  
Do you know that hymn?

During the funeral, the solo was so rich and powerful, that I became curious about the history of the hymn, how it came to be written.

Back in the 1870’s, a Presbyterian named Horatio Spafford was set to travel from the United States to Europe with his wife and four daughters. But at the last minute, some unexpected business came up, and he stayed behind in America while his family departed on the boat.

Only the boat hit another boat on its way to Europe.  
A terrible shipwreck took place.

And of the five traveling from Horatio’s family, only his wife was rescued.

When Horatio received the telegram from his wife notifying him of what had happened, he traveled across the Atlantic to meet her. And while he was on board his ship, he penned the words to the hymn “It Is Well with My Soul.”<sup>1</sup>

Opening line:

*When peace like a river attendeth my way, when sorrows like sea billows roll, whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say, it is well, it is well with my soul.*

Now if you look closely at those opening words, it’s very clear that Horatio Spafford knew his Bible. Because some of the phrasing seems to be borrowed straight from our Psalm for today, Psalm 42.

Verse 7 of the Psalm:

“...all your waves and your billows have gone over me.”

First line of the hymn:

“...when sorrows like sea billows roll...”

I would venture that Horatio Spafford knew his Bible and had this exact psalm in mind when he wrote those words, because Spafford was grieving, and our Psalm for today is a Psalm of LAMENT.

“My tears have been my food day and night...” writes the Psalmist.

“My soul is cast down within me...”

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<sup>1</sup> Much good background on Horatio Spafford’s composition of this hymn can be found on the Wikipedia website.

It's not a topic that we gravitate toward in church, at least not on Sunday mornings, right?

Grief, mourning, loss, lament.

And yet, there's no way for the church to avoid this topic. Because the Bible most definitely deals with this topic.

Just take the Psalter. By one scholar's estimation, there are over 60 Psalms of lament in the Psalter—which means that well over 1/3 of the entire Book of Psalms is about loss!

One of the reasons I'm grateful for Psalms like the one we heard today is the THEOLOGICAL HONESTY that they give us. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann describes these psalms as a move from "...orientation into a season of disorientation."

"The lament psalm," he writes, "is a painful, anguished articulation of...dislocation...a new situation of chaos...devoid of coherence..."<sup>2</sup>

Psalms of lament address very directly the question:

- **How do we deal with those times when the life that we knew is gone...and we've become disoriented?**
- **How do we deal with loss in our lives of faith?**

The most honest answer is that it's not often a clean and neat and orderly experience. When Elizabeth Kubler Ross famously described the five stages of grief—denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance—her work transformed how people approached death.

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<sup>2</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984.

And yet, one of the later criticisms her work received was that grief doesn't just go in a straight line. People can jump—from denial to bargaining, back to anger, then to depression, then to denial again...

In other words, grief is not always a clean experience. Sometimes, it becomes a MESSY experience.

When Alexander Coffin died in a car accident at age 24, his father—the minister William Sloane Coffin—received many kind and thoughtful notes from the members of his congregation.

But he recalls one experience with one parishioner when he was approached by a woman from the church who brought food to the house.

“I just don't understand the will of God,” she remarked.

“I'll say you don't!” Coffin replied with venom in his voice.

“Do you think it was the will of God that Alex never fixed that lousy windshield wiper of his, that he was probably driving too fast in such a storm...?”

God doesn't go around this world with [God's] finger on triggers...[God's] hands around steering wheels. God is dead set against all unnatural deaths.”<sup>3</sup>

The writer of Psalm 42 would agree.

In the midst of an unexpected season of sorrow, the Psalmist does not let God off the hook:

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<sup>3</sup> William Sloane Coffin, “Alex's Death,” in *A Chorus of Witnesses*, edited by Thomas G. Long and Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmanns, 1994.

“I say to God, my rock, ‘Why have you forgotten me? Why must I walk about mournfully because the enemy oppresses me?’”

So perhaps the first step in dealing faithfully with loss is to be honest about it—in all its complexity and ambiguity—to be honest with each other, with ourselves, with our God.

Authenticity is the first step.  
But it’s not the only step.

When the Psalmist writes:

“My tears have been my food day and night,  
while people say to me continually, ‘Where is your God?’”  
the Psalmist answers that question  
not by wallowing in a puddle of self-pity,  
by making a move.

It’s not a move FORWARD, toward easy answers or a quick fix.  
It’s a move BACKWARD, in the Psalmist’s memory:

“These things I remember, as I pour out my soul:  
how I went with the throng,  
and led them in procession to the house of God,  
with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving,  
a multitude keeping festival.”

What is the Psalmist recalling?  
Happier days in former times, yes—but more than that.

The Psalmist is recalling a time of community:

“...I went with the throng...”  
“...a multitude keeping festival.”

According to Psalm 42, what we need during any season of loss is ONE ANOTHER....to NOT be LEFT ALONE.

And what we say and do not say during those times that we surround someone in their loss...it matters.

Kate Bowler, a professor at Duke Divinity School, has written some helpful words about not only her own experience with loss—dealing with stage 4 cancer before the age of 40.

She's also written openly about how OTHER people responded to her illness.

And she came up with a short list of things NOT to say to someone who is walking through a season of sorrow. One of those is:

“Everything happens for a reason.”

*The only thing worse than saying this is pretending that you know the reason. I've had hundreds of people tell me the reason for my cancer. Because of my sin. Because of my unfaithfulness. Because God is fair. Because God is unfair. Because of my aversion to Brussels sprouts. I mean, no one is short of reasons...When someone is drowning, the only thing worse than failing to throw them a life preserver is handing them a reason.*

And she goes on to say that there are some things to do or say: Offering to bring a meal. Offering someone a hug. Or just being with the person in silence.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Kate Bowler, *Everything Happens for a Reason*, New York: Random House, 2018.

And sometimes, the right words at the right time can really help.

Over 25 years ago, after the bombing of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, Bishop Vanuel C. Little was required to say something, something that he hoped would be FAITHFUL and would recognize the devastating loss of that horrendous day.

**Bishop Little, you see, presided at the funeral of 17-month old Tevin D'Aundrae Garrett. The little boy had been in the day care center when the bomb went off.**

During the funeral, Bishop Little looked down at D'Aundrae's sobbing mother, seated in front of her son's small, white casket—and Bishop Little said:

“We have all been paralyzed. Dazed. Wondering why.  
 And there are a lot of unanswered questions  
 I am not able to answer today.

Then he turned to D'aundrae's mother.  
 “I want to tell you something,” Bishop Little said to her.

“...You aren't going to crack up.  
 You're NOT going to lose your mind.  
 You're NOT going to have to be put  
 in some sort of institution.

**We're going to be held up, I promise you.  
 We're going to be held up  
 by nothing less than the Living God!”<sup>5</sup>**

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<sup>5</sup> I am indebted to the Rev. Mark Ramsey for this story, which appeared in a newspaper in Denver, CO, shortly after the Oklahoma City bombing.

Words matter in times of loss. What we say and don't say matters.  
Which is why I'm grateful for what Psalm 42 has to say:

“Why are you cast down, O my soul,  
and why are you disquieted within me?

Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,  
my help and my God.”

You see, Psalm 42 doesn't just ask us how we will deal faithfully  
with loss. It also asks us how we will go forward in hope.

As Brueggemann puts it:

“...the life of faith described in the Psalms is focused on...  
*two decisive moves...*

“One move...is out of...orientation into...disorientation...

“The other...is a move *from...disorientation to a new orientation*,  
surprised by a new gift from God, a new coherence made present to us  
just when we thought all was lost.”<sup>6</sup>

This is a pattern not just in the Psalms.  
It shows up in other scripture too.

For example, do you remember the first story we heard today, from  
Matthew's Gospel? It's a story all of us know very well—the feeding of  
the five thousand.

At least, we think we know it well.

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<sup>6</sup> Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms*.

It wasn't until I was YEARS out of seminary that someone pointed out to me the TIMING of this miracle.

It occurs immediately after the death of John the Baptist.

“His [John’s] disciples came,” Matthew writes, “and took the body and buried it; then they went and told Jesus. Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself.”

THAT’S what happens right before the feeding of the 5,000.  
Jesus withdraws...because he’s grieving the loss of John.  
He’s gone from ORIENTATION to DISORIENTATION.

And it’s then that the crowds follow him.  
And it’s then his disciples say we don’t have enough food to feed these people.

And Jesus does not send the crowds away.  
When there doesn’t appear to be enough—  
not enough fish, not enough bread,  
not enough justice or love or life, because Jesus  
has just lost this giant figure of his life—  
it’s at THAT very moment,  
Jesus trusts that God will provide for everyone...

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It’s not just a story about multiplying food.  
It’s a story about multiplying hope.  
A new orientation!

Has someone ever done that for you?  
You’re walking through your own time of NOT ENOUGH—and  
someone shares God’s hope with you?

As many of you know, Brene Brown is a well-known author and researcher on the subject of vulnerability. When asked how she landed on that subject for the work of her career, she tells of a time when she was in her mid-20s, and her uncle—her mother’s brother—was tragically killed.

“My mom used to always say, ‘don’t look away from other people’s pain because one day you’ll be in pain and you’ll want people to be able to look you in the eye so you know you’re not alone.’

And so when my uncle was killed and I was at [my mom’s] house...it was one of the very few times I had seen her really sobbing...

Brene said to her mom:

‘I just don’t know what to do.  
I don’t know what to say...  
I’ve never seen you weak before.’

And her mother replied, “This is not weakness, Brene. This is vulnerability, and it is part of my strength.”<sup>7</sup>

Now what did Brene Brown’s mother give her right then?  
Not only a career path for her to pursue.  
She gave her hope. A new orientation!  
Hope that in the midst of vulnerability, we find strength.

It’s the kind of hope that all of us need, no matter what season of our lives we’re walking through...

A number of years ago, when I was serving a church in Indiana, I was preaching at the community Good Friday service. The downtown

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<sup>7</sup> I heard this story on Brene Brown’s podcast, “Dare to Lead,” 12-14-20, the transcript of which can be found at [Brené with Jim Collins on Curiosity, Generosity, and the Hedgehog | Brené Brown \(brenebrown.com\)](https://www.brenebrown.com/podcast/dare-to-lead).

churches would get together on Good Friday, and one church would host, another would provide the preacher...that kind of thing.

It meant I was preaching to a crowd of folks, some of whom I knew, many of whom were complete strangers.

One of those strangers came up to me after the service. I was in the library, taking off my robe.

He didn't have one of those gentle, seeking the preacher out to shake hands approach. He was tracking me down.

“Preacher, you need to know something.

“I'm dying of cancer. Doctors say I don't have much more time.

“And the way you ended your sermon today ...it was just AWFUL. You didn't give me any hope!”

And then he left.

I just kind of stood there, robe in hand—that's NOT the kind of comment one usually hears after a worship service. And as I drove home, I started getting MAD!

What was THAT all about?

How dare that man take his frustration out on me??!

It was a hit and run...no time to discuss,  
no time to explain—  
he just dumped his garbage on me and left.

On the one hand, I knew that he wasn't really mad at me.

He was mad that he was sick.

He was mad that he was dying.

He was mad that God was letting it happen.

But his words have always stuck with me.  
Because on the other hand, he was right.

We need hope every day of our lives in every season of our lives.  
And we are called as God's children to embody that hope for others.

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I'm thinking again about what Horatio Spafford did.  
Writing that hymn on a boat after losing his four children.

Spafford did that 150 years ago.

He had no idea that his words would be sung at Mama Joy's funeral, and would give me hope that day. He had no idea when he wrote that hymn how many lives he would touch.

Just like we have no idea what God will do through us, with the hope that we embody...

As we approach the one-year anniversary of this terrible pandemic, maybe the questions God wants us to consider right now are these:

What have we lost this year?  
How are we faithfully dealing with that loss?  
And how, even in the midst of our loss, are we sharing God's hope?

Amen.