

“The Sorrow of Jesus”

Luke 13:31-35

2nd Sunday in Lent

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Westminster, Greenville

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Our text for today is about the sorrow of Jesus.

In your pew bible, there’s a heading over the text—it’s inserted by an editor, not in the original Greek, but I would say it’s pretty accurate.

It reads “The Lament over Jerusalem.”

Today’s text takes place when Jesus knows he will go to Jerusalem, and will be killed in Jerusalem, and he wishes that he could change the hearts and minds of the people of Jerusalem.

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together...and you were not willing!”

Our text for today is about the sorrow of Jesus.

Truth be told, I’m not sure I want to spend time with the sorrow of Jesus this morning.

Why?

Maybe it’s because of all the sorrow that’s going on in the world right now.

Just shy of 1 million Covid deaths in our country.

A war in Ukraine that’s killing innocent civilians by the hundreds, and creating refugees by the millions.

Do you see what I mean?

Start naming the sorrow, looking squarely at the sorrow, and before too long, you want to turn away from the sorrow.

Dr. Sunita Puri is a palliative care doctor who recently wrote about a wife who was grieving the loss of her husband.

“I couldn’t offer her easy answers, only a willingness to stay and listen...She shared photos of her husband over Zoom. They had sailed and cooked and taken selfies on the beach.”

“Earlier in my career, looking closely at this particular kind of pain was as blinding as looking at the sun.”

“I distracted myself afterward with ‘SNL’ marathons and slabs of chocolate cake,” she writes. “Eventually, I realized that it wasn’t my job to protect people from their grief...”

“I have learned to look when I want to look away. I have chosen to stay when I’d prefer to run out of the room and cry. The prelude to compassion is the willingness to see.”¹

What do you think Luke wants us to see, when he turns our attention to the sorrow of Jesus?

Luke’s not the only Gospel writer who does this.
Each of the Gospels have their own scenes of the sorrow of Jesus.

Do you remember the shortest verse of the Bible?
When Jesus is invited to visit to the tomb of his friend, Lazarus?
John, chapter 11—King James Version.
Jesus wept.

¹ Sunita Puri, “We Must Learn to Look at Grief, Even When We Want to Run Away,” *The New York Times*, February 23, 2022.

The shortest verse is about the sorrow of Jesus.

There's the last night of his life, Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. Matthew and Mark both report that on that night, Jesus "began to be distressed/agitated..."

He says to his disciples: "I am deeply grieved, even to death..."

All four Gospels invite us, in one way or another, to spend time with the sorrow of Jesus.

But I'm still not sure I want to do it.

Maybe the reason I don't want to do it is not so much an awareness of the world's sorrow, but an awareness of our own sorrow. You see, when you and I start spending time the grief of Jesus, it's an invitation to look more closely at our own grief.

At our own loss.

Dealing with loss of any kind—
a death, a move, a divorce—

Or even just the natural transitions that we go through in life...the kids leaving home, our health falling apart...any kind of loss can be a confusing and uncontrollable experience.

And so we fear it, right?

We don't like dealing with loss, we avoid looking at loss...

I recall when my family had moved to Dallas 12 years ago, and we bought a house. The home was built in 1954, and the original windows

were still in the home. Of course, they didn't measure up to the safety standards of modern homes.

A pair of guys came out, did the work...but during the course of the job, we noticed that one of the workmen was missing part of his index finger. Half of it was gone...and he was really friendly, so I wasn't bashful, I asked what happened to his finger.

"Lost part of it on the job," he told me.

"It was a couple years ago. I had been dating my girlfriend—who's now my wife—I'd been seeing her for about 7 or 8 years. She wanted to get married, I kept hemming and hawing around. She was getting tired of waiting, but I finally summoned the nerve to ask her to marry me, and she said yes."

"Well, I was so excited, the next day I went to work, all I could think about was getting married to her. And I was distracted, and I had to saw some wood to make a window fit right, and I wasn't paying attention...and shoop. Off went part of the finger."

"Of course, I'll never forget HER response," he went on.

"I went to the ER, called her from the ER, told her not to panic, I had just lopped off part of my finger...but it would all be ok.

And I expected, you know, a little sympathy...
 where are you, what hospital, I'll be right there...
 no, that's not what my fiancé said.

She paused...and then she said:

"It better not be your ring finger, buster!"

Now what was that?
 A humorous response, to be sure.
 But below the humor, can you hear it?

The fear of losing her fiancé?
 The fear of what she was looking forward to the most...suddenly
 falling apart?

Do you know what the two most common questions I hear from
 this congregation are these days?

How's our giving?
 How's worship attendance?

In other words, are we gaining ground, or losing ground?
 Did the pandemic change us?
 Were the past two years a bump in the road...or did we lose
 something that we're never going to get back?

When Norman Maclean wrote about the death of his brother in *A
 River Runs Through It*, Maclean recalled his father's reaction. Over and
 over, his father wanted to know everything he could about how his
 younger son came to lose his life.

"Are you sure you have told me everything you know about his
 death?" asks his father.

"Everything," replies Norman.
 "It's not much, is it?" says his father.
 "No," replies Norman, "but you can love completely without
 complete understanding."

It sounds, in some ways, like Maclean's response to his father was a sign that he had come to terms with the loss of his brother. And yet in an interview years later, Norman Maclean's own son, John, recalls what it was like growing up, and how sometimes his dad—

when he didn't think anyone was around—
would just cry out the name of his brother.

“Paul!” he would say to what he thought was an empty house.

“Paul!”

It was a loss that haunted Norman Maclean his entire life.²

So maybe that's it.

Maybe it's my own fear of loss that makes me not want to preach on this text about the sorrow of Jesus.

Or maybe this is it.

Maybe it's because of the way our text describes that sorrow.

In the 13th chapter of Luke, Jesus just seems to have it all together.

Yes, he laments over the people of Jerusalem.

But he just seems to have it all figured out.

He says:

“...I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.”

One does not get the sense that there's any hesitation in Jesus.

Any struggle in Jesus.

² Norman Maclean, *A River Runs Through It*, Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1976. The interview with John Maclean came from a recording that I heard years ago, but has since been lost.

Any fear of losing his life that's in Jesus.

I'm much more inclined to look at the sorrow of Jesus when he's actually in Jerusalem.

Do you remember how Luke describes it?
Jesus in the Garden.

When Luke tells us that Jesus asked God "remove this cup from me...[and] In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground."

That's the kind of sorrow that resonates with me.

Because grief does not come to us as a controllable, moderate experience. Grief often hits as unexpectedly—as an overwhelming experience!

But the more I think about it, the more grateful I am that Luke portrayed Jesus' sorrow in differing ways.

Facing loss like he's got it all together in chapter 13.
And in chapter 22, arguing with God about the loss he knows he'll suffer, and he's unable to keep it all together.

When you look closely at the sorrow of Jesus, Jesus himself seems to fluctuate—he goes from moving forward with courage and faith to begging God for help with his faith...

That sounds about right.

Because we all fluctuate. We all need help, when it comes to moving through the losses that life brings. We're not meant to make it through the losses of life on our own.

How many of you remember Psalm 23?
Our children [will sing/have sung beautifully] this Psalm in our service today.

It's a Psalm of comfort.
A Psalm of hope.
The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul...

Do you remember the next verse?
Yea, though I walk around the valley of the shadow of death...
No wait, that's not it.
Yea, though I skip right by the valley of the shadow of death...
No, no.
Help me out here, what is it?

Yea, though I walk THROUGH the valley of the shadow of death.
That's right.
Through the valley—thou art with me.

Because we cannot make it through the valleys on our own...

When I was 12 years old, my grandmother died.

She was the first grandparent in my life to die, the first time I really encountered death in a life-changing way.

Shortly after her death, my father took me to see what was then a popular, and recently released movie: *Places In the Heart*. Set in Waxahachie, Texas at the height of the Depression, the film is remembered among many for its closing scene.

Early in the film, a young African-American man accidentally shoots and kills the local sheriff, and in retaliation, that young man is lynched by a mob of white residents in the town.

In the closing scene, a church in that town gathers for worship on a Sunday morning. The sheriff's family is there, and during communion, the tray is passed from person to person, each one offering the elements, and saying, "The peace of God."

But as the camera follows the people sharing communion, it moves from those who are alive to those who have died—and the ones who have died are now alive in that scene, and sitting with the living, sharing communion with them.

The sheriff who was shot passes the peace of God to the young man who killed him.

It's a moving scene of God's kingdom, a vision of God's power over death itself.

But what I remember most about that movie is what my father said to me after the movie was over. As we were walking to the car, my dad said to me:

"That last scene—that's what your mom and I believe has happened to your grandmother. We believe she is alive right now, in communion with God, worshiping God, singing and praising God."

In other words, it had been a few months, but my father knew I was still grieving my grandmother's death. And he wasn't telling me to get over that grief, or to move on from my grief.

He was telling me that in the love and grace of God, my grief for my grandmother was NOT all there is. He was telling me that God's love was even stronger than my grief, even stronger than death itself.

Now I don't think I could tell you about any other conversation I had with my father when I was 12 years old.

But I remember that one!

Why?

Because my father was walking with me, willing to travel through the valley beside me...

Here I am, almost all the way through this sermon...and I think I'm finally ready to spend a little time with the sorrow of Jesus. Why? Because Jesus' sorrow doesn't just remind me of my own sorrow, or of the world's sorrow.

It reminds me of the people who have walked through the valleys of life with me. And it is in those people, at those moments, that we see the risen Christ.

The retired pastor Jon Walton once visited a parishioner in the hospital who had just been diagnosed with lymphoma.

It was advanced, there would be no cure.

This elderly woman then said to her pastor, "I wish you'd been here earlier. The doctor came to see me with three handsome young interns in tow. [He] said to me, 'Maybe you would like to share with these young men something that they should know as doctors, especially in light of your faith, and what I've just told you.'

She said to her pastor, “I hardly knew what to say. It seemed like it was so important. Here I was in bed and I was supposed to say something that these young doctors could remember.

“I didn’t think I had anything to say, so I just said, ‘Somehow I trust that whatever happens to me, I will be in God’s hands, and that gives me hope.’”

She looked at Jon Walton and said, “I wish you’d been here. You would have said it so much better than I could.”

And the Rev. Walton looked at her, and said, “No, I couldn’t. I couldn’t have said it any better at all.”³

And neither can I.

You know why I finally decided to preach on this text?
Because of you.

See, I’ve never met anyone who has loss and grief and sorrow all figured out.

But I have met you.

And some of you have gone through corridors of grief that I’ve never walked through. Some of you have stared unspeakable loss in the face.

And even when that happened, you kept showing up.

³ Jon M. Walton, “Thanks at All Times,” a sermon preached at First Presbyterian Church, New York, NY, November 23, 2008. I read this story in Thomas G. Long, *Accompany Them with Singing—The Christian Funeral*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.

You kept being here for one another.

You kept coming back to this sanctuary, to sing God's love and praise.

You're the reason I preached on this text, because when I look out at you, I see the gospel truth:

That God's love is greater than any loss that we will ever face.

That God's love shows up in the gift of one another.

That whatever happens, you and I will be in God's hands, and we will see the risen Christ in each other.

That gives me hope.

I trust it does the same for you.

Amen.