

“Grieving with Hope”

November 25, 2018

Good Grief? Series

Christ the King Sunday (after Thanksgiving)

“Do you suppose if I wore this I might get a hug?” I was shopping at Sam’s Club this week, walking through the clothing aisles, and a woman had her hands on one of the very soft sweaters in the piles. I didn’t know her, but she asked me as I passed by, “Do you suppose if I wore this I might get a hug?”

I’ll be honest – I was a little taken back by it, but I’m not sure why. I shouldn’t be so surprised that God can show up anywhere, anytime, even in the midst of Thanksgiving week, frenzied shopping. It really became a “God moment” as this woman shared that she’d lost two husbands – both wonderful men – and that’s what she missed the most – their hugs.

She even told me a story about a time she was particularly lonely and prayerful about the loss of her spouse. She had been asking God for help and peace as she grieved. She was at the gas station struggling with the gas cap on her car. A man came up and offered his help, and she was grateful. He asked if it was OK to give her a hug, and she gladly accepted it. She said how God provided what she needed. I agreed – and gave her a hug.

It was one of those times when I felt the Holy Spirit was saying, “Pay attention – this is good stuff!” This stranger offered me something I needed as I thought about this message and our whole series on “Good Grief.” She was an example of honesty, faithfulness, and hope in the midst of grief, and she had a good word to share from her own experience of grief.

Grief is painful, to be sure, but she also found hope and trusted in God’s care. So that was the question that I kept asking myself: how do we hang onto hope in our grief? Where do we find a good word today? We’re at the end of the Christian year and on the cusp of Advent starting next week. How are we entering this new season with hope?

We’ve talked about grief – how it’s so common and so individual, how we really live in two worlds as we claim the promise of heaven and feel the pain of grief now, how we need compassionate companions and need to be compassionate companions – listening and offering support. Last week, Pastor Diane offered a word about grief and thanksgiving – and a verse from First Thessalonians that has become a touchstone for me – “Give thanks *in* all circumstances...” – not “*for* all circumstances.”

Certainly the authors of Holy Scripture weren’t always thankful for the circumstances of their lives. They shared grief and struggle. Lamentations is full of hard

questions and honest prayers offered in the midst of difficult times. Babylon had destroyed Jerusalem in 587 BC, killing many people, destroying the city, and toppling the Temple.

So Lamentations reflects the mourning of the whole community. One writer says it's like people "singing while suffering from open wounds." The people wonder what will become of them and all that's left behind. Perhaps the prophet Jeremiah wrote it – or maybe others who reflect the deep grief of the time. Either way, it's not easy reading.

I can't imagine facing the destruction of my hometown, but there are those among us who can. I appreciate Ivan sharing his story. It always offers me perspective when I consider what it means to grieve other losses – identity and country.

I imagine words like those in Lamentations coming out of modern-day war zones like Yemen where thousands of children are starving as parents watch famine destroy lives. Perhaps the people of California are asking questions about "why?" where wildfires have ravaged acres of land and claimed many lives, too. I wonder if those who have left Central America can relate to the laments as they share their fears about why they're leaving home and why they don't want to return. There are so many who are hurting; maybe you're hurting today.

The good news is that these mourners in Lamentations don't hold back, which is powerful. They address God directly, which is faithful, and they speak of hope, which is even more incredible! Somehow they speak of God's grace and mercy. Somehow they land on hope here – that God is compassionate and loving – even in the midst of suffering.

It's a good word – and a true word – from those who are seeking God. It's a deeply held belief and trust, and I think about those who have experienced losses of many kinds and their witness of God's care. I read through Lamentations again and had my own time of confession. I can't imagine what they experienced. I can't imagine suffering in the same way. And yet we all want a good word to hold onto.

We are hungry for a good word – a healing word, a hopeful word. We want a good word to sustain us – not something trite or a platitude – but a word to claim in the midst of what we face. That's what Paul offers the Thessalonians.

This is the earliest of Paul's letters – probably around 50 AD. The expectation is that Jesus Christ is going to return soon. They are waiting with anticipation and longing, and I imagine there were a lot of questions about how and when Jesus would return – just like we have today.

So Paul speaks directly to those who have lost loved ones and are wondering what will happen to them. The issue is that loved ones have died before Jesus comes again. Paul says that because of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, we don't have to

mourn like those who don't have any hope. Hope is a part of our faith, and we claim the promise of new life.

And then Paul actually offers a vision, which can seem like a strange picture of what will happen when Jesus comes again - a trumpet sounding and people going to meet Jesus in the air. I've always found it odd, but actually this image is something similar to how Roman rulers would enter a city they ruled: a trumpet would sound, the ruler would go into the city, and the citizens would come to meet the ruler.

It's interesting that Paul's description may be a reminder to the people that God's power is greater than the empire's power, greater than the emperor (the most powerful politician of the time!), greater than any worldly power. In the midst of wondering how and when Jesus would come again, Paul calls them to trust in God's power and in God's presence.

Some scholars read these verses as Paul's way of saying that Jesus Christ will return and join believers in healing and renewing all of creation. What a vision! This isn't simply about getting to heaven, but it's also a call to be a part of offering healing and hope!

And maybe we need to hear that good word, too. We're not alone in our grief. God is working to bring new life. God is offering hope. God's mercies really are new every morning, and we can claim them as our own – and share God's grace. God is faithful and will not leave us or forsake us. And nothing, and no one else, has that kind of power or promise to offer. Our hope comes from God - and God alone. And Paul is clear about it:

SHOW SLIDE: May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope. – Romans 15:13

I love that phrase – “overflow with hope.” What does that look like right now? Isn't that a wonderful vision in the midst of hopelessness?

I'll be honest - I don't get too caught up in the how and when Jesus will come, but I trust that he will. And I hear Paul clearly saying that hope matters and community matters. Encourage each other, he says. I think about the call I received last night from someone letting me know that they wouldn't be in church because a family member is in the hospital. They wanted us to know and asked if we would pray.

Hope matters, and community matters. For me, the truth of God's presence is most visible when the church is at its best - when we're looking to Jesus to lead us, knowing that our faith calls us to love God and love each other, and clinging to hope that God is at work.

One thing that our GriefShare program offers is an opportunity to acknowledge grief and find hope. Perhaps it sounds simple, but the need is clear. We try to avoid the

pain of grief because it's so difficult. We deny our feelings. We try to toughen up and just get through it. We figure it will just get better with a little more time. Yes, the pain of grief might lessen, but the reality of loss is still there.

I hear it over and over again from grieving people – *I don't know how people get through this without faith...without the church...without God.* There's something powerful about God's care and commitment to be with us in our grief. It doesn't mean that it's easy, but it is different.

And it requires us to be intentional about opening our hearts to God. Can we really receive the grace and peace that God offers if we don't acknowledge our need for it? God's grace is there whether we acknowledge it or not, but what's our part in opening ourselves to receive it? How powerful our witness is when we recognize that we can't do this alone - that we're truly dependent on God!

I heard that from the person who called me last night, and that's what I heard from the woman in the clothing aisle at Sam's Club. God had blessed her with loving relationships that she treasured, and she missed her loved ones. But I also heard her witness to her trust in God's care and God's presence. She had hope that ran deep down and that couldn't be taken away, and she blessed me. I invite you to see a video...

SHOW MEDIA: "God of the New"

John Wesley was the founder of the Methodist movement in England in the 1700s. His desire for revival in the church is a part of the reason we're here today. And I love the story of Wesley's last words as he waited to finish this earthly life and experience eternal life. He said, "Best of all, God is with us."

After years of preaching and teaching, that was his hope, and it's ours, too. Our God is with us in life and in death - and always. Grief is real, and hope is, too. May we grieve with hope, knowing that we are never alone.

Thanks be to God. Amen!

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE