

March 29, 2020
Year A
John 11:1-45
Psalm 130

The 5th Sunday in Lent
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

Emmanuel, Norwood, MA
Zoom Worship Service
Morning Prayer

Grieving

Every day for the past two weeks I have woken up in the morning to a Facebook feed full of messages of words of encouragement for a time of Social Distancing. Some of them are profound. Some of them are funny or ironic. Some of them are scolding, reminding me of the stakes of not remaining socially distant. All of them have a “we’re in this together and everything’s going to be all right” “keep a stiff upper lip” kind of vibe.

Some of them were the kind of thing that I myself might post on Facebook or send out to my friends in a stronger moment, in a more inspired or inspiring moment.

Indeed, that is largely what I have been doing. I’ve sent messages out to you, my congregation, saying, “Hang in there” and quoting lines from Psalm 46, lines that have been floating through my head, reminding me of what I certainly already knew. That this things like this have happened before to us and to others, to other communities, to other nations, to other people in the world throughout history, this unsettling of the things that we have come to rely, the shaking of the nations, and that in those times, people have survived, people have come out on the other side, and have seen that God was with them in the turmoil.

The reason that I feel like I know Psalm 46 well enough for it to come unbidden to my mind during a time of crisis, is because Martin Luther paraphrased it in his most famous hymn, *A Mighty Fortress is Our God*.

Because Psalm 46 was an important Psalm to Martin Luther, it is the Psalm that we read on Reformation Sunday, every year. Martin Luther, who knew so much upheaval in his life, in his time, plague, wars, and religious conflict, found strength in the words of this Psalm and so, it has come to me in this time when I feel like I need strength and I have shared it with you as well.

Psalm 46:1 God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.

Psalm 46:5 God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved; God will help it when morning dawns.

Psalm 46:7 The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.

I've also shared funny or moving moments from social distancing in our own home with my Facebook friends, being trying to be a little bit more present in the digital sphere to encourage people who are isolated, who are bored, who are lonely, trying to do my part, like so many others, to keep our collective spirits up. Because we are, in fact, all in this together, all doing our part to protect each other, to protect the vulnerable in our own communities and around the country and around the world, to protect our own neighbors and families.

But I must admit, there have been those times during these past two weeks, when I have not been in that stronger, more inspired or inspiring place. There have been times when I have resented the messages of encouragement, the “keep a stiff upper lip” mantra, whether it has been communicated with a scold, or a laugh, or even with beautiful poetry, because there have been times when I have not felt strong, or brave, or inspired, or determined to make the best of it.

The truth is, there have been times in the past two weeks when I have, quite simply put, been grieving.

Now, I have not lost a loved one. I have not lost a job. My family is safe and my congregation has found a way for us to worship together. In comparison with the things that so many others have lost in this time of pandemic, I am, without question, one of the lucky ones.

I know that, but that hasn't stopped me from grieving for the things I have lost. All that knowing that I have what I have lost in this time of upheaval, is small compared to the things that others have lost has not stopped me from grieving. It has just mixed some guilt in with the grief, as I have asked myself the question,

what right have I to grieve what I have lost when so many other people have lost so much more?

But, if being a pastor for 17 years and training to be one for five years before that, has taught me nothing else, it has taught me that grief isn't something you compare. The last thing you want to say to someone who is grieving is, "Well, it could be worse. You could be grieving for this other, much worse thing."

While that perspective might be true, it certainly isn't helpful. People should give others the space and the grace for them to mourn their own losses whatever they may be, without jumping in to remind them that other people have it worse. Because when people are grieving, the last thing that they need is a guilt trip.

So, I have given myself space to recognize the fact that I am grieving. Now, I realize that this social distancing is necessary. I don't resent it. It's the right thing to do. I would never not do it just because it's hard and because it's making me sad not to be living the life that I expected to live during these weeks and months.

But I am grieving because it's hard. It's certainly not just sitting on the couch. It's certainly not just uninterrupted family time.

It's friends not seen. It's family members, not seen. It's parents and grandparents seen only via screens, talked to only via the phone.

It's people losing jobs and wondering how they are going to keep their families fed and housed in the coming weeks and months and even years, as their personal economies fall apart.

It's knowing that people are sick, that people are dying, that people who work in hospitals are overwhelmed and scared and in danger of becoming sick themselves.

It's worship without the communion meal, it's worship without the tangible passing of the peace, it's worship in a silent, empty church building that should be full of people. It's the Confirmation lock-in, which was supposed to be this weekend, rescheduled, for when? I don't know. We had just had started our First Communion classes on March 7th. First Communion itself was supposed to be on

April 26th. Will it be, can it be, would it be safe for it to be? I don't know. It's quilts unfinished in Kask Hall. It's making plans to hold Holy Week and Easter worship over a computer rather than in our sanctuary.

It's kids' concerts, and sports games, and plays and field trips cancelled. It's, kids, not my kids, but other kids, kids I know and care about and just kids in general, having their senior years totally messed up. It's education lost, even though educators and parents are trying their best to keep kids learning. It's confronting my own failures as a parent to impose an internal schedule on my household when the external schedule is lost.

I am grieving my lack of being able to plan because no one knows when it will be safe for this social distancing to end. I'm used to having plans for myself, for my family, for my church, going ahead months. Now, I have no idea what's going to happen, next week, next month, two months from now. What's this summer going to look like? I don't know.

I'm grieving missed experiences for myself and for people I love and for my community. I'm grieving for the loss of predictability and the loss of the pattern of our lives. I'm grieving for the loss of the illusion of control that I have had for most of my life.

Sometimes I've been in that Psalm 46 place, being strong and courageous, saying and believing that, "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble."

But I've also been here, in this place of grief, living the words of Psalm 130, our Psalm for today:

Out of the depths

I cry to you, O LORD...

I have felt the depths during this season of life. I have been one who has been waiting and watching for God, to make things right again.

I wait for you, O LORD; my soul waits;

in your word is my hope.

My soul waits for the Lord more than those who keep watch for the morning,
more than those who keep watch for the morning (Psalm 130:6).

The wonderful things about the Psalms is that sometimes they praise, sometimes they celebrate, sometimes they reassure, and sometimes they teach us to wait, to cry out, to wonder, to lament, to grieve, and to expect great and wonderful things from the Lord, even when they haven't come yet, even when we can't seem them over the horizon. Psalms teach us that it's okay to grieve and that even in our grief and our loss, we can still and perhaps **are** still praising God.

Now, feeling personally inclined and professionally obligated, at least in public to keep up the "stiff upper lip" façade, I probably wouldn't have shared any of this with you, if it weren't for the fact that today our gospel reading is about, grieving.

Because today, we have the story of two sisters who have faced the biggest loss of control, perhaps the biggest grief that a human being can experience, the death of a loved one.

And this loss was compounded by a loss of confidence in a friend, who they believed, who they knew, had the power to save their brother from death, but who hadn't shown up in time.

Martha and Mary's brother, Lazarus had been sick and the sisters had sent word to Jesus so that he could come and heal their brother, but he had not come. And Lazarus had died.

The sisters were surrounded by people, friends who had come from nearby Jerusalem to mourn with them and to console them, but they were, in some very real way, alone in their grief.

When you lose someone it's almost always like that. People come to show their care and support and love, but in some very real ways, you are just alone,

because the person that you want most to be with you, the one who is dead, can't be there. Other people are necessary, they can help in some ways, to buffer you from the loss, but when someone you love has died, it can still feel like you're all alone in a crowded room.

By the time Jesus finally got to Bethany, to meet with the sisters, Lazarus had been dead for four days. Martha was the first one to meet with Jesus. And she greeted him with the words of her own lament Psalm.

“Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.” (John 11:21-22)

This is what lament Psalms are. They are honest expressions of where we are. Psalm 130 says, “in the depths,”. In other lament Psalms the speaker is grieving, lost, alone, attacked, wondering where God is.

Martha said, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

That was where she was, put as bluntly as possible. Grieving and wondering where God had been in her moment of need, because, she believed that Jesus had the power of God at his command.

But lament Psalms are also expressions of faith. Psalm 130, says, “for with the Lord there is steadfast love; with the Lord there is plenteous redemption.”

Martha said, “But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.”

Grief and trust. That is how Martha and then, Mary, expressed their faith in God.

And I'm grateful for the reminder, at a time when I'm struggling with my own grief, when I'm struggling with the fact that I don't know what's going to happen next, when I'm faced with the reality that I don't have any answers or any control at all over the timeline of this thing, and that I have to lay aside so many plans, lovingly made, and looked forward to for months.

It's good to be reminded that there is no prohibition on Christians from acknowledging that they are sad, that they don't understand, that they feel bereft, that they are mourning for what they have lost.

And it's also good to remember that even in those times, God is still with us, that God doesn't leave us there, in those places of grief and loss.

Ultimately, as God always does, Jesus brought life into Martha and Mary's situation. He brought life to their brother Lazarus.

In the gospel of John, this is Jesus' last miracle before he enters Jerusalem, for the last time. In fact, it is the last miracle that Jesus performs before his crucifixion, when he died to bring life to all people.

Ultimately, we will be able to be together again, and so many of the things that we're missing will restart, we'll worship and celebrate and sing and quilt and take communion together again. The Confirmation class and I will get to play Jailbreak one of these days. We'll watch our kids and our grandchildren play and hug our loved ones and greet our neighbors and travel and work again, and perhaps we'll cherish those things that we once took for granted a bit more, realizing the beauty and joy and even holiness there is in so many simple things.

But for now, we wait, and while we wait, and encourage one another and support one another, it's okay to lament, to recognize the things that are being lost, to recognize that even as this is a time for courage, it's also a time for grief.

But in our grief, we do not need to despair. Because God always comes, with a resurrection plan. So, we can trust that "for the Lord there is steadfast love; with the Lord there is plenteous redemption." Amen.