

The Bethel Pulpit

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BETHEL

LUTHERAN CHURCH

On the web at www.bethel-madison.org

Text: Psalm 29; Luke 13:31-35

Join me in a word of prayer: Divine Creator of this entire cosmos, you call us together to worship, pray and sing your praise. Let the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you. Grant that what we say with our lips, we believe in our hearts and what we believe in our hearts, we ask that you give us the courage to live out in our lives. In Jesus' holy name.

Amen

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This is a test! Well, kind of a test...just a test to get you thinking: Listen carefully and thoughtfully to these phrases:

deep and poignant sorrow

keen mental suffering and heart-break

painful regret

What word comes to your mind as you hear these words? A word, for which any of those phrases would serve as a definition. Here's a hint: look at your bulletin cover.

I'm rather reluctant to tell you that this bulletin cover and the topic of 'walking through grief' is our worship focus for the next 5 week-ends. You must be saying: "Really? 5 sermons about grief?" Such an agenda could be the precise reason that you would choose to take an August hiatus from worship at Bethel. We live in a culture that does not even want to THINK about grief, much less talk about it and even more precisely, we don't need to be PREACHED AT for 5 weeks in a row.

This is a crazy reality: we work very hard to avoid, deny, get over grief of any and every kind and truly, this IS crazy, since grief is a universal experience. It's

one of those very normal emotions with which God has gifted every single one of us. Grief is a totally normal human experience. Not easy, not fun....but normal. Take a moment to name the places of grief in your life.

Most often, grief is associated with the death of a loved one, especially an early death or some horrendous tragedy.

Death is always about loss, yet death is not the only loss that has the power to bring us deep grief: loss of job, loss of relationship, loss/diminishment of health, loss of place...what 'loss' in your life has brought you deep and poignant sorrow and or keen mental anguish?

In our five-week focus on grief, we decided not to begin with the individual and personal aspect of grief, but rather to think about grief in a very broad context: cosmic and/or divine grief. Each week we will narrow the perspective, and consider times of national grief, realities of communal grief, then how grief is experienced within our extended families and finally, the last Sunday will focus on personal grief.

You are totally correct in knowing that I do not pretend to be an expert on EITHER cosmic or divine grief. I certainly have no certificate of study in the field of cosmology, nor am I God, who would be the only authority on the subject of divine grief. My words, today, are mostly questions for us to consider, as we look at some of the Biblical texts that give us reason to begin from this very broad perspective.

What is your opinion: do you think that God has the capacity for sadness? Much traditional theological

doctrine has taught us that God is 'immovable', not vulnerable to emotional ups and downs that humans know. God does not change. God is the one constant and God knows all things.

God certainly NEVER changes in God's ways of forgiveness and love and inclusivity and hospitality. Throughout both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament, we hear, over and over again that God is 'gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.' These truths of God never change.

Not all theologians, however, believe that God is either immovable. They believe that God IS vulnerable to human events and human pain. Entire books have been written, similar to one by Terry Fretheim with the title The Suffering of God. So, we are back to that question about whether or not God experiences grief. Does God know anything about 'painful regret'? Genesis in chapter 6 certainly gives us reason to know this reality for God, when God sees all the wickedness and we read in vs. 6: "The Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth and it grieved him to his heart."

In the Luke text that we read, we heard Jesus painfully lament: "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often have I desired to gather you together, as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" Like any parent, Jesus expresses sorrow that we, as humans, continue to live in ways that deeply hurt and violate one another.

Cosmic grief is expressed in Romans 8, where Paul writes that the WHOLE CREATION is GROANING ! Hear and now in 2019, we have good reason to pause and think about the ways we humans have abused our beautiful earthly home and our conversations are becoming more and more serious, causing us to ask what we must do in order to help this earth heal its wounds so that future generations

will also have a chance at healthy living.

As we (the preachers in this series) considered the what and why's and wherefores of such a long series on the various experiences of grief, we asked what we hoped our basic 'take-away' for you, our worshippers, would be.

"Walking with Jesus through Grief toward Hope", would be the longer theme line. "Jesus loves you. Walk with him" is Bethel's mission statement. So, too, Jesus invites us to remember not only his love for us and that he never leaves us, even in our most desperate and despairing times of grief.

We have already said that grief is a totally universal and natural human emotion. It's part and parcel of human existence. So, we are not alone in experiences of grief. For each of us, we ask what gives us reason for hope, that we can get through these times of grief.

We need to remember that God is always a God that is working toward healing and restoring and making all things new.

Going back to the story of the flood, God saved a remnant of all that had been created and furthermore, God promised never again to wreak such devastation and destruction. Our bodies are always working toward healing. Think of those little cuts and scrapes that heal all by themselves. We recognize that God's goodness and healing are not the only force in the world. Diseases continue to plague us and sometimes the only healing that God can do is the ultimate release from suffering and pain, as death moves us from this life to life with God.

We do not walk through grief alone. God is at our side. God provides friends and family to walk with us. And our strongest hope lies in God's eternal purpose of restoring that which is broken, and whether in the cosmos of creation or in our individual lives, God never stops working for healing and wholeness. Thanks be to God.

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