

“*Theologia Crucis*, Staurology, Theology from Palms to Cross”

Palm/Passion A (April 5, 2020) - **COVID-19 (SUNDAY 4)**

Scriptures:

Rev. Dr. David A. Kaden

>>Put a hand on our shoulder and point us in the right direction. Put *our* hand on someone’s shoulder and let it matter. Amen.<<

This past week one of you sent me an article from the Harvard Business Review about grief. The article’s title is “That Discomfort Your Feeling, That’s Grief.”¹ The article begins with these words: “Some of the Harvard Business Review edit staff met virtually the other day - a screen full of faces in a scene becoming more common everywhere. We talked about the content we’re commissioning in this harrowing time of a pandemic and how we can help people. But we also talked about how we were feeling. One colleague mentioned that what she felt was grief. Heads nodded in all the panes [on Zoom].” Writer Joan Didion once said of grief that “when it comes, [it] is nothing like we expect it to be. ... Grief has no distance,” she says. “Grief comes in waves ... , apprehensions that weaken the knees and blind the eyes and obliterate the dailiness of life. Virtually everyone who has ever experienced grief,” she says, “mentions this phenomenon of ‘waves.’”²

The Harvard Business Review staff interviewed David Kessler, one of the world’s foremost experts on grief. Kessler was asked whether it’s right to call what people are experiencing now “grief”? “Yes,” he replied. “We feel the world has changed, and it has,” he said. “We know this is temporary, but it doesn’t feel that way, and we realize things will be different. Just as going to the airport is forever different from how it was before 9/11,” he said, “things [for us] will change The loss of normalcy; the fear of economic toll; the loss of connection. This is [all] hitting us and we’re grieving. Collectively.” But, he went on, “we’re also feeling anticipatory grief. Anticipatory grief is that feeling [of] ... uncertain[ty]. ... [Like when] there is a storm coming. ... [It’s] the mind going to the future and imagining the worst,” he said. Kessler was then asked about how we can manage grief at this time. He said grief comes in waves - like what Joan Didion described - and that grief has five aspects or stages. “There’s denial,” he said, “which we say a lot of early on: *This virus won’t affect us*. There’s [also] anger,” he said, “*You’re making me stay home and taking away my activities*. There’s [also] bargaining,” he said, “*Okay, if I social distance for two weeks everything will be better, right?* There’s [also] sadness,” he said, “*I don’t know when this will end*. And finally,” said Kessler, “there’s acceptance: *This is happening; I have to figure out how to proceed*. ... We find control in acceptance,” he said. “*I can wash my hands. I can keep a safe distance. I can learn how to work virtually*.” Denial, anger, bargaining, sadness, acceptance - all aspects of grief. “It’s important we acknowledge what we’re go[ing] through,” said Kessler. “There is something powerful about naming this as grief. It helps us feel what’s inside of us.”

I’ve been sitting this week with this notion of grief - grief over job losses, economic losses, changes in routine, anxiety about infected family members or friends, worry about older parents or grandparents or friends or family, some of whom work in healthcare and are especially vulnerable, fear about the future. Grief. An emotion that surfaced for me this past

¹ <https://hbr.org/2020/03/that-discomfort-youre-feeling-is-grief>

² Quoted in: <https://www.brainpickings.org/2013/12/05/joan-didion-on-grief/>

week when Ithaca's mayor tweeted a picture of an empty Green Street during rush, and when Michael Clark posted on Tik Tok a series of images of empty subway stations and empty streets and closed businesses and an eerily empty Times Square in Manhattan with Mozart's *Requiem* playing in the background. Grief. An emotion I felt after re-reading Pete Wells' would-be restaurant review in *The New York Times* from a couple of weeks ago.³ "I had a real peach of a review lined up for this week," he wrote. "When I finished it, I still imagined that New York City's restaurants would continue to look and act in some recognizable manner through March and maybe April . . . [Instead, he writes,] I spent the weekend chasing rumors and talking to bar and restaurant owners. The crash of stocks and the violent plunge into a bear market, which in another time would have these owners in a panic, barely came up. Instead they talked about [merely] surviving." One celebrity chef, Tom Colicchio, told his staff, "'guys, get ready for a big hit. This is terrible. This is the end of the restaurant business as we know it.'" Grief. To the five stages of grief, David Kessler, renowned expert on grief, added a sixth during that Harvard Business Review interview: meaning. How can we create meaning in the midst of grief and suffering? "I [do] not want to stop at acceptance, [the fifth stage,]" he said. "I wan[t] meaning in th[e] darkest hours."

Which is where, I think, today's scripture readings come in, in particular today's reading from Psalm 31. Psalm 31 is what scholars call a "Psalm of Lament." It puts poetic words to the feeling of grief. Today's Psalm is drawn from one of the two sets of lectionary readings for this Sunday. The two sets of lectionary readings are broken down into categories: one set for the Palms; the other for the Passion. One set of readings is celebratory with shouts of hosanna and Jesus riding into Jerusalem like a triumphant king - readings for the Liturgy of the Palms. The other set is soulful and mournful, the whiff of death poking through the words - readings for the Liturgy of the Passion (passion comes from a Latin root word that means suffering; these are crucifixion readings). We call this Sunday Palm/Passion Sunday - a blending of human emotion from happiness to grief. Psalm 31 is a passion reading. A lament. A poetic cry to God from the depths of grief - grief that racks the poet's body: "I am in distress," laments the poet. "My eyes have dried up from weeping - there are no more tears to shed. My soul and body are wasted, all the way down to my bones." "I feel shattered, like a broken vessel." As with most of the Psalms, we can't know for sure what this Psalmist was going through. It could've been anything: maybe he was lamenting some illness; maybe his life had been upended in a matter of weeks; maybe he feared for the future; maybe the restaurants in his town had closed; maybe the streets and subways were barren during rush hour; maybe he feared for loved ones and friends and healthcare workers; maybe his income had dried up; maybe he was racked with anxiety when entering a grocery store; maybe someone close to him had been infected with something beyond their control; maybe he himself was infected, and his thoughts turned to the family he might leave behind. We can't know, historically speaking, what this Psalmist was going through. Whatever it was, it was a kind of crucifixion - a cross he carried - a moment of passion and pathos that erupted in the poetry of lamentation. "My eyes have dried up from weeping - there are no more tears. My soul, my body, my bones are wasted. I feel shattered."

This past week New Testament scholar and Anglican Bishop, N.T. Wright, wrote about the Psalms of lament for TIME magazine.⁴ We are in a moment, he writes, when the

³ Scroll down to read it:

<https://www.nytimes.com/live/2020/coronavirus-usa-03-16?action=click&module=Top%20Stories&pgtype=Homepage#the-end-of-the-restaurant-business-as-we-know-it>

⁴ <https://time.com/5808495/coronavirus-christianity/>

“Rationalists” among us want “explanations,” and the “Romantics” among us want “relief.” “But perhaps what we need more than either,” he says, “is to recover the biblical tradition of *lament*. Lament is what happens when people ask, ‘Why?’ and don’t get an answer.” It’s at this point, he continues, when we can turn to the Psalms, “the Bible’s own hymnbook.” To the “sixth Psalm” which says, “‘Be gracious to me, Lord, for I am languishing; O Lord, heal me, for my bones are shaking with terror.’” It’s at this point, says Wright, when we can turn to “the 10th Psalm,” which asks, “‘Why do you stand far off, O Lord? Why do you hide yourself in time of trouble?’” It’s at this point, says N.T. Wright, when we can ask with the 13th Psalm, “‘How [much] long[er will this go on], O Lord? Will you forget me forever?’” And it’s at this point, says Wright, when we can cry out, as Jesus does on the cross, borrowing words from the 22nd Psalm, “‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’” The biblical tradition of lament, says Wright, is “an outlet for our frustration, sorrow, loneliness, and sheer inability to [fully] understand what is happening or why.” Lament is an ancient poetic tradition that gives voice to our deepest emotions - emotions like grief.

It’s been tempting, I think, for some of our fellow Christians across the world to try and explain what’s going on - to offer “meaning,” as David Kessler said when he spoke of the sixth stage of grief. I’ve seen some Christians on Twitter try to frame the virus as a sign of the end times, of the apocalypse, by appealing to the plagues in the Book of Revelation as evidence. And I’ve seen others appeal to the notion of God’s “plan” - that somehow, in some mysterious way, this virus is part of a grand plan God has for us, as if God has afflicted us to teach us some lesson. We may learn lessons from this, but the biblical tradition of lament, shoves all attempts at explanation off the table, and focuses instead on the humanity of it all - the emotion of it all - offering poetic words that give voice to what we’re all going through. Pastoral words, compassionate words. Words of empathy - words that give voice to the grief of people like Maura Lewinger, whose 42 year old husband and father of three, succumbed to the virus this week. Maura had to say goodbye to her husband on FaceTime; she played their wedding song for him as he took his final breath.⁵ And the words of lament in the Psalms - words that don’t speak of plans and apocalypses to teach lessons - but words that are human words of grief that give voice to the grandson who said goodbye to his grandmother, a holocaust survivor, as she was intubated this week. And the words of the Psalmists, the words of lament, give voice to the grief felt by the 562 families in New York State who said goodbye for the last time on Friday, one family every two and a half minutes.⁶ And these words of lament - these mournful, poetic words - were the very words that Jesus uttered from the cross. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” from a Psalm of lament, Psalm 22. And Jesus quoted today’s Psalm as he hung on the cross, Psalm 31: “into your hands I commit my spirit.” If there’s any meaning in suffering and grief from our tradition, it’s found in what Reformation theologian Martin Luther once called the *theologia crucis* - the theology from the cross, the “staurology,” from the Greek words that mean cross and study of. For it’s in the cross - the very cross we all will carry this Holy Week, the cross we will all “gaze” upon, as Richard Rohr says, before we arrive at Easter next Sunday - it’s in the cross that we see, as theologian Jürgen Moltmann once said: it’s in the cross that we see the “crucified God.” The God, said Moltmann, who weeps and suffers and grieves *with* us. A God who “does not willingly afflict or grieve anyone,” as the writer of the biblical book of Lamentations puts it. Rather, as the ancient Psalmists say, this is a God who is *with* us in the

⁵ <https://www.cnn.com/2020/04/03/us/wife-facetime-husband-coronavirus-death/index.html>

⁶ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/03/nyregion/coronavirus-new-york-death-toll.html?action=click&module=Spotlight&pgtype=Homepage>

midst of life's darkest valleys. "I won't be afraid," writes the poet in Psalm 23, "for you, O God, are *with* me." You grieve and suffer *with* me. And, as Yale Divinity School poet Christian Wiman once said, "I'[m not sure] what it means to say that Christ 'died for my sins,' ... but I do understand ... the notion of God [on the cross. A God who is] not above or beyond or immune to human suffering, but in the very midst of it, intimately with us in our sorrow, our sense of abandonment, our hellish astonishment at finding ourselves utterly ... helpless."

It's Christian Wiman who once told the story - a story I've shared with you before - a story about his own brush with death. Wiman, married with twin daughters, was diagnosed with bone cancer in his late '30s - a period of suffering and grief in his life that led him back to the Christian faith after being an atheist for years. He and his young family lived just a few hundred yards from a church. "That church at the end of our block," says Wiman, "turned out to be part of the United Church of Christ. The sanctuary was small, starkly beautiful, less than half filled with a mix of old German immigrants, a smattering of hipsters and upscale parents, and a couple of people who seemed homeless or headed there. The preacher had a real presence. ... The service, too, was a surprise. After welcoming gays and lesbians, the preacher spoke inspiringly of the church as a place where our individual and communal needs and instincts were reconciled. [It struck a chord with me]. ... We filled out a visitors card but, hedging our bets, slipped out the side door to avoid having to meet the preacher. But the next morning, he emailed me. We had an interesting exchange about churches, backgrounds, poetry ... but nothing further. ... [M]y days [at the time, says Wiman,] were manic and scattered, my nights wakeful and anguished. ... That was the cloud I was walking under early one bright winter morning, maybe a week after the exchange of emails with the preacher, when I heard my name. I turned around to see him half running down the street toward me as he tried to pull a flannel shirt on over his T-shirt, careful not to trip over his untied shoes. I was in no mood to chat, especially not to an enthusiastic preacher, and all my thoughts were hostile. But I stopped, we had a kind of introduction as he tied his shoes, and then he asked if he could walk me to the train station. Those days are a blur to me," says Wiman, "but I remember two things from that morning very clearly. I remember [him] straining to find some language that would be true to his own faith and calling and at the same time adequate to the tragedy and faithlessness ... that he perceived in me. And I remember when we parted there was an awkward moment when the severity of my situation and our unfamiliarity with each other left us with no words, and in a gesture that I'm sure was completely unconscious, he placed his hand over his heart for just a second as a flicker of empathetic anguish crossed his face. It sliced right through me," says Wiman. "It cut through the cloud I was living in and let the plain day pour its balm upon me. It was, I am sure, one of those moments when we enact and reflect a mercy and mystery that are greater than we are, when the void of God and the love of God, incomprehensible pain and the peace that passeth understanding, come together in a simple human act. [He and I] stood for a minute in the aftermath, not talking, and then went our suddenly less separate ways."

... This moment of grief - this time of grief - maybe it's a moment to just sit with the biblical words of lament. Those ancient words, forged in the fires of suffering and pain. The very words the suffering Jesus himself uttered. And in the very act of reciting them - the very act of praying them - we might find, as Wiman says, the peace that passeth understanding. Amen.