

“When Jesus weeps”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
Service of the Longest Night
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By Rev. Patrick D. Heery

I wasn't there when my grandfather died. But I can picture the moment as if I had been.

I see snow falling in large, wet clumps. It's dark but for the flickering, harsh light of a single parking lot lamp. Within its rays I catch a glimpse of my uncle, kneeling over my grandfather, desperately trying to pump life back into his father's heart, breath back into his namesake's lungs. The CPR isn't working, however.

It's cold, so the tears are freezing to my uncle's face. He had only been away for a few minutes. The two of them had driven to the local hardware store for a last minute need. But when they had arrived, my grandfather said he wasn't feeling well, and so he stayed in the car while my uncle ran inside. By the time my uncle returned, my grandfather—just a couple months into retirement—had suffered a major heart attack and died.

It was Christmas Eve. Thirty-three years ago.

I know that it was 33 years ago because I was born a year later, also in December.

My family said I was an answered prayer—the only thing that made Christmas bearable, a season now marred by the anniversary of my grandfather's death.

Truth is the holidays can be difficult for many people. It can feel like everyone around us is so happy, so sure of purpose, clad in bright lights and festive parties, and all along, we're kneeling in our own private shadow, trying to pump life back into something, or someone, we lost.

Tonight, we gather on the longest night of the year to light candles in the dark—to call on Christ to come once again and fill our broken hearts.

When this chapter in the Gospel of John begins, we learn that Jesus' friend is sick—Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha. The same Mary who sat at Jesus' feet, who anointed him with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair. Mary and Martha are his friends, his followers. They have seen him heal the sick and save the lives of many.

And so they send Jesus a message, saying, “Lord, he whom you love is ill.” How many of us have sent similar prayers to God?

But the hours pass, and still no Jesus.

When he finally shows up, Lazarus has been dead for four days. When Martha learns that Jesus has finally arrived, she runs ahead to meet him and says, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” How many of us have shouted at God in pain and anger: “Where were you when we needed you the most?”

When Mary meets Jesus, she makes the same accusation: if you had only been here, this wouldn’t have happened.

And then something unexpected happens: Jesus cries. He sees Mary and her friends weeping, and suddenly, John tells us, his soul aches, and he too is moved to tears.

There are in fact only a few times in Scripture when Jesus cries. He cries as he enters Jerusalem, weeping for a city in pain. He cries in the Garden of Gethsemane before his arrest, weeping in loneliness, knowing the suffering that awaits him. And he cries now. In this startlingly intimate moment. Jesus breaks down. He weeps Mary’s tears, Martha’s, the tears of the other Jews.

It’s funny how we forget that part. We skip right to Lazarus’s resurrection; that’s all anyone remembers. But long before we get to any miracle or display of power, Jesus weeps.

Because that’s what Jesus does; Jesus joins us in our grief; he feels every bite of our pain, every tear, every wail, every doubt. He gets down in the mud with us. He allows us to sling our mud at him, because he knows that sometimes we just need to throw it at someone.

And after doing that, Jesus, in our story, asks to see Lazarus. He says, “Show me. Show me your pain. What you’ve lost.” They answer, “Lord, come and see,” just as we tonight invite God to come and see our pain.

There, at the tomb, Jesus prays, saying, Father, you hear me, I know you hear me. He commands the stone rolled away, and then, because Jesus is there, light and life break into that dark tomb.

What you need to know is that Jesus, in this story, made a conscious choice to come back for Lazarus. He didn’t have to. He was safe beyond the borders of Judea. His disciples begged him not to go back. But he does go back. He goes back for Lazarus. And it costs Jesus his life. This is *the* moment in the Gospel of John when the Pharisees decide to kill Jesus. So, when I say that Jesus gets down in the dark with us, I mean just that. But he tells the disciples not to worry, because *he* can see the light, and there are others who are stumbling in the dark, in whom the light has been driven out, and they need him.

In this story, I see a parable for our relationship with God. God enters our pain, suffers with us, accepts our anger, and then calls us out of our caves and unbinds the darkness that has wrapped itself around our hearts. But God doesn't rush there; God allows us to sit in the dark, for we may need to sit there for awhile, grieve for awhile. Sometimes, when you're hurting, you just need folks to stop trying to fix everything. You don't want to hear that "God has a plan," or that "God just wanted another angel," or that "God never gives us more than we can handle." You don't want advice. You just want exactly what Christ offers—Emmanuel, "God with us." You want a companion for the darkness, someone to hold you tight and let you cry.

Rachel Whaley Doll, a friend who struggled with infertility, says, "The most beautiful thing a church member said to me during our struggle was 'This just sucks, and I had words with God today about you.'"

So, I guess you could say, we too, like Mary and Martha, are having words with God tonight. We bring it all—the pain, the anger, the fear, the hope, the joyful memories and longings, even the doubts. God accepts every bit, and answers, as God always has, not with cheap fixes or platitudes, but with the love of a child who suffers with us and, with a gentle kiss, heals our wounds.

We call this child, Jesus, the Messiah.