



“Grief and Meaning”

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Psalm of Lament 31 by Ann Weems:

How long will you watch, O God, as your people live huddled in death?
The whole world is dressed in tears and I have joined the procession of the bereaved who
walk daily in the death places.

We drown in the sea.

We bleed on the battlefield.

We lie stricken on sickbeds.

We are judged in the courtrooms.

We are victims of crime.

We are homeless and hungry.

Is this not enough?

We are tormented by mental illness.

We are abandoned by loved ones.

We wait in unemployment lines.

We grow up on the streets.

We live with disabilities.

We are injured in accidents.

We are plagued by family problems.

We fight drug and alcohol abuse.

Have you not heard enough, O God?

We sit in police stations.

We watch our loved ones endure pain.

We are falsely accused.

We encounter prejudice and hate.

We are humiliated and abused.

We contend with unbearable stress and anxiety.

We weep by the grave.

We are your people, O Creator God!
We are the work of your hands.
Is there no more grace for your troubled ones?
Will we continue our unholy procession around the pit of living death?

There is no sun, no moon, no star.
We cannot see our way.
Have pity on your world, O God, have pity on your weeping world!

We remember all the time you lavished your grace upon our heads and into our hearts.
You gave us the gift of light and we walked with our heads up in the procession of life.
Restore us, O God, to your sanctuary.
Look upon us and let your heart be moved to break the bonds of the bereaved.
In this hope is our joy.
In that day, we will run to join the procession of life and we will sing hymns of praise
Forever and ever, and ever and ever!

Sermon:

Do you all know about Elizabeth Kubler-Ross's five stages of grief?
Denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance.

Kubler-Ross's work is so well known around the world that you can find it being used in schools and hospice work, of course, in hospitals, but also in banks and in businesses, in the midst of divorces and in funeral homes. And yes, for the Covid pandemic.

Sometimes these stages of grief are depicted in a looping curve from up, to down low, then curving back up towards acceptance.

I saw a graphic just the other day that put it rather bluntly: You expect the curve...what you get is a tangled snarl!

Because, grief isn't tidy. It is messy.

And in this pandemic, and in this life wrapped up inside the pandemic, there is so much to grieve.

A good friend misses writing in her favorite coffee shop.
Another misses the grandparent who died from Covid.

Another is desperate and angry after closing their business, forever.

Another is sorrowful because “date night” is no fun without their tradition of “dinner and a movie”.

I refuse to judge whose grief is more important than any other’s.

What I hear and what I see, and what I myself experience, is the turmoil of grief.

Just two weeks ago, my own grief and the roiling anxiety over Jim’s fighting of Covid...made me distracted and feeling a heaviness that wouldn’t lift.

And I was gently reminded that sharing of vulnerability, sharing of the emotions of grief and confusion and anxiety and tiredness...was not a sin. It was a sharing, and for some, even a gift.

Holding grief to oneself, hiding grief, stuffing grief, not allowing grief...makes the journey through grief into a truly tangled, mangled knot.

Today in our worship you have heard the words of lament from Ann Weems, a Christian poet, who suffered the terrible death of her son, one week after his 21st birthday.

The stars went out, she wrote. Night was black, and there was no day.

Ann says that she began to write her laments in desperation, and then she would stick them in a drawer, not wanting to see them again.

And then, there would be another.

And another.

And another.

If Kubler-Ross is right, and millions upon millions of people confirm her insight...then anger, and denial, and depression and bargaining are what we are in for now.

Lots of it.

But there are ways to be angry that do not harm others, and there are days when denial will roar through us, but we don’t have to blame anyone else.

There are times ahead for us as a nation when we will want to somehow bargain our way out of some truly difficult grief filled times with our black siblings, and all people of color who have been despised, rejected, and harmed by our racism and violence.

Americans are immersed in a variety of griefs and all through our society I believe we are seeing people consumed in the experiences of grappling with grief, whether it is through rage, or bargaining, in denial and depression. It is all around us; whether it is about Covid19 and the overwhelming number of the dead, or racist historic monuments being torn down, or angry white terrorists in Michigan planning to murder their governor!

The story I have read, and then told, and told again, to all of us about Westminster's founding and our relationship with the Spokane tribe...that story will have to be retold in a different way once we include the grief and the betrayals felt by the Spokane people. We will need to experience pain and messiness, and perhaps denial or bargaining at one point or another...but with time and with honesty, we will, I believe, come to a place of acceptance.

The work of grief is messy. We have been warned. But to not do this work of grief is to be stuck, to be overwhelmed, or buried in it and obsessed with it, encompassed up to your neck in it.

As Ann wrote, "no stars, no moon, just black night." Her work of grief flowed out, at least in part, through her lament poems, her psalms of grief.

Good people:

There is a sixth stage to grief. Kubler-Ross had a colleague, David Kessler, who worked with her and co-wrote her famous book, and then wrote some of his own, about death and dying.

And then, a few years ago, his beloved son overdosed and died.

And he felt the deep, deep need to write another book.

Finding Meaning: The Sixth Stage of Grief.

He speaks honestly of finding meaning by telling other addicts the story of his beloved son's life and accidental death. He tells it with eloquence and the commitment to helping others, and he feels that it gives his life meaning. And it gives meaning to the death of his son.

My beloved parents are both dead, but the life I live is filled with meaning that I have from them that transcends their deaths. I know I live out values that I learned from them, and these I have shared with my own children, and these inform my activism in the community, and the sermons I share with you. The lessons of love that I learned from them shape me utterly, and I will forever be grateful to my parents for those lessons on love. Their example of love and service will not die. It lives in me. I share it with others.

I will never forget this year of loss, and grief, of social upheaval and American challenges to our very democracy...and so many things that seem to have died.

But I also find meaning in many things.

- Perhaps it is finally time that we humans will change our habits towards abuse of our planet? Dolphins swimming in the canals of Venice, is a vision of hope in the midst of pandemic.
- Perhaps the very dangers to our democracy here in the United States, and the need to make a change in Washington D.C., will propel people to the voting booths as never

before. Perhaps we finally realize the value and importance of our system of government, and our power to sustain it and protect it, in the power of our Votes?

- Perhaps, now, in the midst of the pandemic, we will learn to NOT turn away from the dangers of racism that are embedded in our culture, our attitudes, our laws and our policing?

David Kessler tells the story of meeting a dear friend just months after his son's death, and then not seeing them again until years later, when he saw him again, with a broken arm! His friend said, "I only see you when you are wounded, emotionally, and physically." David responded: "NO, I'm always healing when you see me."

Your grief is real.

My grief is real.

We will feel all sorts of feelings, and we can recognize them, accept them, and let them go through us. There may indeed be denial, and anger, and bargaining, and depression before we ever get close to acceptance and understanding.

Let us choose to seek meaning. Meaning in our lives. Meaning for those whose lives have been lost.

Meaning for being here, even when those we love are not here beside us, anymore.

Grief can hurt us. Grief can overwhelm us. Grief is messy and confusing.

But we can learn from David Kessler: We can seek out and find meaning in the midst of it all,

And

We can be people who are healing, even in the midst of it all.