

## **THIS SICKNESS WILL NOT END IN DEATH**

JOHN II:1-45

Fifth Sunday of Lent | March 29, 2020

Community CRC, Kitchener ON

Sisters and brothers in our Lord Jesus Christ, our scripture passage for today, in which Jesus raises his friend Lazarus from the dead, presents us with an amazing story of our Lord's power over death. But it also offers us a glimpse into the tender heart of our Saviour. In this passage, we have the shortest and most straightforward verse in the Bible: "Jesus wept." The text tells us several times that Jesus was "deeply moved and troubled in spirit," and emphasizes through repetition the importance of Lazarus' friendship in Jesus' life. Jesus loved Lazarus. Jesus loved his sisters. And even though Jesus has power to defeat the forces of evil, to conquer sin and death, when he is confronted with the costly human reality of it, he is moved to tears. Even though Jesus knows the truth of his words, *This sickness will not end in death*, when he is faced with the very real pain of loss, he is cast down in grief.

This past week, I read a powerfully insightful and helpful article titled "That Discomfort You're Feeling is Grief" by Scott Berinato, senior editor of the Harvard Business Review. Berinato writes about how his staff met via video, and they started off their staff meeting by going around and having everyone share how they were feeling with everything. When one colleague mentioned that she was feeling grief, heads in every pane on the screen nodded in agreement. Berinato hopes that if we name what we are feeling as grief, perhaps we can manage it.

In the article, Berinato goes on to interview David Kessler. Kessler, together with Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, co-wrote the famous book *On Grief and Grieving*, which introduced the world to the five stages of grief. While the interview focuses on managing grief in the context of ongoing businesses, dealing with topics like working from home, worrying about job security, missing the company of co-workers, etc. I think there's much that we, as the church, can learn from these scholars about managing grief.

Because we are also grieving. Just as Christ grieved the toll of the Fall on the life of his friend Lazarus, we grieve the toll that the Fall takes on our lives as we journey through this life. This is always true, but now, in our current situation, when it is not even safe for us to worship together or gather in small groups, the cost of sin and evil in this world seems

particularly high. Together with many people in society, we grieve the disruption that this has on our regular rhythms of life; many of us are adapting to working from home, others are adapting to living without employment. Like many in our world, we are grieving the loss of company of friends, coworkers, family, and the fellowship of believers. Together with the whole world, we grieve the harm and the loss of life that this disease causes, and we worry in a special way for those who are near and dear to us, for those whom we love. We grieve for those in our lives who do not know Jesus as their Lord and Saviour, and in this time of uncertainty we feel that pain cut deeper and harder than ever before. And as a fellowship of believers we share the special grief of the loss of corporate worship. As we look ahead to the very likely possibility that we will not be together in person for Good Friday or Easter Sunday, these services that are so special to us all, we are filled with a powerful and painful grief.

Not knowing when we will be able to gather again, the uncertainty of it all, is a grief in and of itself. We start to imagine worst-case scenarios, the prospect of a sad and terrible future of loss and uncertainty, and it fills us with despair. Following the five stages of grief, we deny the reality, especially early on: *This isn't a big deal. We can continue life like normal.* We get angry: *You're taking away my hobbies, my friends, my family, my church.* We bargain: *Maybe we can take a break from social-distancing just for one Sunday, right?* We fall into depression: *This will never end, my friends and parents will die, church will never be the same.* And finally, eventually, we learn acceptance: *This is happening, this is our reality. Let us figure out how to move forward together.*

And acceptance, of course, is where we find the power to grapple with our grief in positive and constructive ways. In accepting the reality of our grief, we are able to differentiate between what is under our control and what is not. We don't control when this pandemic will end. We don't control when large gatherings will be allowed once again. We don't control when we can gather for worship in person, in this sanctuary. We don't control who gets this disease and who does not. We don't control who suffers and who recovers. We leave those things to God.

But there is much that we can control. We can practice good hygiene. We can protect the vulnerable among us by practicing social distancing. We can follow the advice of health professionals and government officials. We can learn to work from home. And we can be

intentional about taking this opportunity to rethink our priorities when it comes to life and faith. We can spend quality time with those who live in our home. We can call and text and email our sisters and brothers in Christ. We can develop new rhythms of personal and family devotions. We can read edifying books and articles. We can be an encouraging and uplifting presence on social media. We can gather together on Sunday mornings for worship, and we can learn to appreciate it. There is power in acceptance.

As followers of Jesus Christ, of course, we have a powerful tool when we grapple with grief that these scholars do not name. We have the power of hope. As the Apostle writes to the Thessalonians, *we do not grieve as those who have no hope, for we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him* (I Thess. 4:13-14). Like Jesus going to the tomb of Lazarus, we know how this story will end. This sickness will not end in death. As followers of the Lord of Life we face grief with hope, knowing that our God is preparing for us an inheritance that cannot be taken away.

The German theologian Jürgen Moltmann reshaped the Christian conversation about hope in his 1967 book *Theology of Hope*. In the introduction of this book, Moltmann writes about how the whole gospel is centred around the tension between God's promises and their fulfillment, and how we as Christians live in that unique in-between place. God has made promises to us, those promises have been sealed in the death and resurrection of Christ, and we are assured of them through the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives, even as we eagerly await their fulfillment when Christ comes again. We live between the *already* and the *not yet*. We live in the tension between the victory of Christ over sin and death on the cross, and the ultimate defeat of evil when he comes again. And we are sustained in this journey by embracing hope.

Moltmann writes that there are two primary sins against hope in the Christian life. On the one hand, we can fall into despair, doubting the promises of God will ever be fulfilled. The relentless and overwhelming cost of the Fall can cause us to doubt God's power, God's goodness, God's faithfulness. We begin to doubt that God will keep his promises. We begin to believe that the powers of this world really are equal to the power of our Lord over sin and death, and despair that the great Redeemer will ever truly be able to remove the stain of wickedness on this earth.

But there is another sin against hope, Moltmann writes, which is just as pernicious and just as harmful to our lives of faith. And that is the sin of presumption, denying the reality of sin in this world as though the promises of God have already been fulfilled. When we fall into presumption we fail to recognize or be honest about the heavy toll that evil still takes in this life. We pretend that everything is fine when it is most definitely not. We forget how to lament, how to cry out to God in the midst of our pain. Presumption makes it difficult for us to pray with integrity and wholeheartedness: “Come quickly, Lord Jesus.” Presumption is a denial that there is anything left for God to conquer, that life is as good as it will ever be, that there is no need for God to do any more work than he already has. Moltmann argues that as we journey through life in this world, as we journey from promise to fulfillment, that Christians need to be constantly vigilant and on guard against these two sins against hope, protecting ourselves equally against both the temptation to despair, and the siren song of presumption. True Christian hope does not lead to resignation or apathy, but to courageous and imaginative action as we live as light and salt in a world of darkness and decay.

In his new book, *Finding Meaning: The Sixth Stage of Grief*, David Kessler argues in favour of adding a sixth stage to the five stages of grief. He argues that finding meaning in our suffering is a sixth stage, beyond acceptance. That the true redemption (although he doesn't use that word)—the true redemption of suffering and loss comes in the meaning that we are able to find in it.

When we look back a hundred years ago at the church's response to the Spanish flu pandemic in 1918-1919, the last time that churches were closed down in North America, we see that while our forebearers in the faith certainly mourned the grief and loss of the pandemic, they were able to find meaning in it. They came out of that trying time with a greater appreciation for corporate worship, no longer taking it for granted. They came out on the other side with a stronger loyalty and devotion to their local congregation. And they learned a greater appreciation for the devotional and theological literature that helped sustain and strengthen their faith even when they were not able to listen to sermons or worship together in person.

But there is a real danger in skipping straight to finding the meaning in our suffering without recognizing the pain and grief that we share. This is what makes visitations and

funerals so difficult for people who have lost a loved one. While we who have lost are grappling with the injustice of death and the pain of loss and the wickedness of the power of sin in this world, others come through the line and shake our hands and try to give us meaning. While we rage against the unfathomable darkness of death, others try to comfort us with trite clichés: “His suffering is over.” “She’s in a better place.” “He’s singing with the angels now.” “Look how peaceful she is.” “He’ll always live on in your memories.”

In our pain-averse culture, it is all too easy for us to skip the difficult journey and jump straight to fulfillment, straight to meaning. It is easy for us to fall into the sin of presumption, which denies the pain and cost of evil and death, and as a result, denies the need for hope.

We jump from promise to fulfillment, and we skip over the difficult, emotional, and painful journey between the two.

I like to think of the story of Jesus and Lazarus as a journey from promise to fulfillment. At the beginning of the story, Jesus makes this amazing claim: when Jesus hears that his friend Lazarus is sick, he says to his disciples: *This sickness will not end in death*. I don’t think this is a prophecy as much as it is a promise, although the disciples probably thought of it as a prophecy, and when Jesus announced two days later that Lazarus had died, they were probably wondering whether Jesus was losing his prophetic touch. What do you do with a prophet who says, *This sickness will not end in death*, and then two days later the sick person dies?

But Jesus, the Lord of Promise, is true to his Word. He knows that the Creator has power to bring order in the chaos of this world, power to bring everything out of nothing, power to bring life out of death.

But even Jesus does not skip over the journey from promise to fulfillment. Jesus journeys with his disciples from Galilee to Judea, to Bethany. Jesus waits outside town, preparing himself to face the reality of death. He speaks with Martha and Mary about their pain and their loss. He is deeply moved. He is troubled in spirit. He weeps. He cries out to God, echoing the words of Psalm 130: “Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord!” And only then, when he himself has faced and wrestled with and accepted the painful reality of grief, of loss, of death, does he bring about the fulfillment of his promise. Our Lord does not deny

our pain. He does not deny our humanity. Instead, he enters into our world, he enters into our flesh, he enters into our grief, he enters into our pain. He walks the journey with us.

*This sickness will not end in death.* This seems, to me, a powerfully appropriate word of hope for the strange reality in which we now live. In the face of spreading disease, the great healer promises us *This sickness will not end in death.* In the face of isolation, loneliness, and grief, our Lord promises us *This sickness will not end in death.* In the face of loss—as we mourn the loss of fellowship, of work, of societal comforts, even the loss of health and life, our Lord promises us *This sickness will not end in death.* Even in the face of death itself, the darkest stain of the plague of sin in this world, our Lord assures us *This sickness will not end in death!* As we journey through this season of grief and loss, we lift up our hearts with hope to the One who raised Lazarus from the dead. For he assures us that even in the midst of our pain and sadness and anger and grief, he is with us—with us in our pain, with us in our suffering—to comfort us and to strengthen us, as we cry out to him together with this suffering world, “Come quickly, Lord Jesus!” Restore your creation! Make all things new! In the midst of our grief, our Lord assures us with the hope-filled promise: *This sickness will not end in death!* This season will come to an end, and we will be restored, to one another, and, at last, to God himself, in the glory of the New Creation.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

**Dear Lord, today we listened to your Word, we ask that you help us apply it to our lives and allow you to bring us from the darkness into the light. Show us hope in our despair, so that we may recognize that you are the resurrection and the life. Amen.**