

“So We Cry”

I was speaking with a young man, who remarked that he was somewhat put out that he had been asked for a donation to send for the relief of victims of Hurricane Ida. His perturbation was that he had never heard that anyone donated to a fund when we suffered through a blizzard. His argument was, if you choose to live on the coast, you accept that this will bring the potential for damaging storms, so don't come crying to me for help when that happens.

On one level, I understand his frustration. It does appear that some people have placed themselves in harm's way by where they have chosen to live. In much that same way, people who make life choices about excessive drinking, smoking, eating, or anything else should expect nothing but the predictable consequences of such behavior.

On another level, it is one thing to anticipate the occasional bad weather disruptions to one's home, and quite another thing to suddenly realize that home is not there anymore. Predictable? Probably. But, then, who could afford to just pack up everything, leave that home, and buy a place inland? I must say that I lack patience with the people who decided to “ride out” a hurricane, and then have to be rescued from their flooded homes — that's just foolishness. But to not care that someone has been suddenly made homeless is just wrong — what, if anything, you may do in response to that need is a matter of many choices, one of which would be your own resources. So while I get this young man's sense of injustice, for those of us who follow Christ, compassion becomes a dominant motif.

Today we focus on All Saints. Actually, it would appear that our lessons point us to Saint Lazarus, since the lessons are all about death and resurrection. With so much death and destruction across our nation, the topic is timely. What do we do in the face of such destruction? One response is: *“What happens to them is a shame. What happens to you is a hardship. What happens to us is a tragedy. What happens to me is a*

disaster.” But such a response grows out of our sinful selves.

In a timely article in an edition of *Concordia Theological Quarterly* (Yes, I read this stuff), S.J. (I have no idea what those letters stand for) Munson wrote an article with what I first thought had the unfortunate title, “*The Divine Game.*” I say “unfortunate” because I don’t think God plays games with us. But “S.J.” was referring to something Luther wrote in his Lectures on Genesis concerning the many trials and difficulties of the Patriarchs, “*Reducing man to nothing, giving him up to death, and afflicting him with disasters and troubles without number — this is not playing is it? It is a game of a cat with a mouse, and this is the death of the mouse.*” (AE 7:225) That is, Luther argues that, when things go awry — like when hurricanes strike, or a job is lost, or we get a hangnail — such trials are not God “messing with us.” We face such trials, Pastor Munson writes, “*and the Lord makes use of them in order that sin may be revealed in us and that we understand ‘who we are in God’s eyes.’*”

Much of what we call tribulations are results of sinful actions — our own or that of others. Even those things which insurance companies love to label “acts of God” are better understood as results of a broken and distorted Creation. Sin has infected the system so deeply, that everything has been compromised — especially us. Accordingly, whatever comes our way in forms of pain, distress, heartache, or disruption we dare not lay at God’s feet. God is not some puppeteer who deigns to see us dance across hot coals. God is not Zeus, with bolts at-the-ready to zap us for any or no reason. Pastor Munson adds this insight: “*We may take comfort . . . that no time of tribulation and distress can be so great and so long as to break us or drive out the seed of faith that has been planted within us.*”

That all came to mind as I began to reflect on today’s Gospel — or I should say “reflect again” on a question that must arise as we hear this account from John: *Why did Jesus’ cry?*

Now, before we get to that question, take another look at the Gospel for this day. You will note that the “shortest verse in the Bible” has been significantly elongated. “*Jesus wept*” has been upgraded to “*Jesus began*

to weep.” This actually acknowledges that the Greek form of the verb describes an action that is ongoing. So it has to be translated as “*began to weep*” or “*was weeping*” (I don’t think I would take it as far as “*kept on weeping*” which would make it sound rather protracted and eventually inappropriate).

If we keep it “*Jesus wept*” the picture that comes to our minds is something like that of the Indian in the public service message who looks over the polluted landscape and then camera pans in on the single tear rolling from his eye. “*Jesus wept*” — good, now that’s over. No. “*Jesus was weeping.*”

Now the question: “Why?” Why was Jesus weeping when He knew that, within minutes, He would call Lazarus out of that tomb? The first answer is: “*Because in the face of loss and pain, humans weep.*” Jesus is fully human, so the death of his friend Lazarus caused him to react as a human. Had Jesus not wept would have made Him a freak!

The emotional “rule” is this: “*Every loss demands an appropriate season of grieving.*” Note well: “every loss” — from that aforementioned hangnail to the death of a loved one to catastrophic destruction of a coastline. Note well also: “appropriate season of grieving”: a bad hair day does not require a week of sackcloth and ashes; the explosion of a generator in an orphanage cannot be handled with a few minutes of sad demeanor; many people require more than a year to go through the grief process after the death of a loved one.

Our emotional response to what is going on in life is not a mark of our faith or a lack of faith. We react as we are wired to react — by prior experiences; by our understanding of what is going on in the moment; by our past wounds.

Now take note of what Jesus does in the midst of His tears: He presses on to the task at hand. Here is where faith begins to show itself. Although grieving, Jesus does what He came there to do: to show forth the glory of God. We cannot always gain control over our feelings, our emotions. We

can and must control how we remain faithful to what we know is God's purpose for us.

What is God's purpose for you? First and foremost it is that you trust Him. You may want to react to that with "*Of course. That goes without saying.*" But it can't go without saying because there are pulls and pushes from all directions to move us away from trust in God. The first pull is trust in self: "*I can handle this.*" (whatever "this" may be). The next push is to search for some outside resource that will help us: a substance, a savior, a system. Which devolves into: "*Why is God doing this to me?*" Which moves to "*God must not love me,*" or worse, "*God is not God.*" As the "devil" character in Archibald MacLeish's "J.B." intones: "*If God is God he is not good; if God is good, he is not God.*" This is where Satan loves to lead us.

So we come back to: Our primary purpose is to trust God. Trusting entails listening, paying attention, always looking, as did Jesus, to see what the Father is doing. "*What is God doing in your life?*" That is a formational question and one you should be asking yourself on a frequent basis. Or, a question akin to it: "*Where is God in what is going on and what is He doing in the midst of it?*"

You cannot come to trust God without spending considerable time with Him (which is true of any relationship). You cannot be trusting God if you're not paying attention to His voice, His prompting, the working of the Spirit. To trust God, you need to recognize God when God appears.

As we listen to the prophet Isaiah proclaim the end-time in today's First Lesson, we see the destination of that trust: "***. . . he will swallow up death forever. Then the LORD GOD will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken. It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the LORD for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.***" That, in turn, is echoed by the vision of St. John the Divine in today's Second Lesson: "***. . . he will wipe every tear from their eyes.***"

Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.”

Jesus wept that day before the tomb of Lazarus because in the face of loss, we humans cry. But He knew — indeed, He embodied — the hope expressed by Isaiah and Revelation. Jesus knew that His summoning Lazarus out of the tomb would rile up His opponents; that they would indeed come to the opinion, ***“If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation.”*** [John 11:48] He knew they would try to find some way to stop Him; He knew what the future held.

But He summoned Lazarus forth anyhow, because that is what the Father was doing in that moment. No matter the consequences, He would do what the Father wanted to get done.

We contend with a lot of losses in life. Not just the major destruction of a “cyclone bomb” that leaves millions bent and broken in its wake. But also losses throughout life: a ding in your car door; the melt-down of your computer hard disk; being reamed out by your boss; having the lettuce in the refrigerator turn brown and slimy; nicking yourself while shaving (face or legs); rushing a loved one to the Emergency Room; having your car sputter to a halt in rush hour traffic; getting the letter about the impending IRS audit . . . and I could go on *ad infinitum, ad nauseam*, amen.

When we face these losses, we want to cry.

So cry. When losses come, they deserve a time fo grieving. So we cry. But St. Paul reminds us that we are not to grieve as those ***“who have no hope”*** [1 Thessalonians 4.13]. Yes, Jesus wept, and through His tears he directed with resolve: ***“Take away the stone.”*** Still disturbed, He announced to Martha: ***“Did I not tell you that if you believed*** (read there “trusted”), ***you would see the glory of God?”*** Still in tears, He prayed to the Father (one more check-in to see what the Father was doing in the moment). And with tears abundant, Jesus ***“cried with a loud voice,***

‘Lazarus, come out!’”

I maintain that Jesus was not done crying when He did the Father’s bidding, but pushed through His grief to show us that always, always! God’s grace and mercy attend us in the midst of our tears.

Luther, in his Lectures on Genesis offered this sage counsel: *“When you think that our Lord God has rejected a person, you should think that our Lord God has him in his arms and is pressing him to his heart. When we suppose that someone has been deserted and rejected by God, then we should conclude that he is in the embrace and the lap of God.”* Even more so when that “someone” is yourself.

This is “the divine game”: in the middle of misery, God reaches out to embrace us, to hold us, to secure us, to delight in us. He doesn’t necessarily remove the cause of our grief and suffering; He joins us in it.

So we cry . . . and are loved beyond our comprehension.

Amen.