

“In the Valley of the Shadow of Death”

Lamentations 3:22-26, 31-32

Ephesians 3:14b-21

2 Samuel 12:15b-23

“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me.” These words are as comforting as they are challenging. Though they lift up God’s presence, even in the worst circumstances, they bring into full view what we often fear the most – evil, darkness, death. At the same time, this psalm subtly reminds us that we do not always have these things in view. We know that there is evil and sin and death, but, well, they dwell in places we often fear to tread. Sometimes in moments of grief-stricken panic, we are only certain that our loved one is gone; the darkness is a barrier that resists our earnest efforts to peer in, to find the one we lost, to bring them back to us. And when we grieve, whether we want it to or not, that shadow death is cast upon us, filtering our reality, changing our course, trying our faith.

Because we don’t walk through the valley of the shadow of death at the same time, it can be really hard to know how to be there for each other. Of all the problems and obstacles we face, death is really the one thing that we can’t fix for each other – no matter how much we might want to. And so, when we grieve, there is some good, helpful support. But there are also a lot of people who mean to be helpful, but really just want us to be less sad, to knock it off, to get over it already. People stop saying the loved one’s name because they don’t want to make you “sad,” as though the grief vanishes from day to day. People stop calling; people get frustrated.

When my grandfather died two years ago, most of the family was able to make it out to Maryland for the funeral. My mom’s family is full of engineers, a career path to which my grandfather happily led the way. As we waited in the church library before the funeral, my uncle

wanted to take a family picture. So, we moved this enormous conference room-type table over to the side to make room. But the table broke – the top came off and one of the legs slumped over. Once the picture was taken, a veritable gaggle of engineers went to work at their favorite task – a new problem to solve! One of the pastors came back in, assuring them that they didn't need to worry about the table, that it had already been broken, that they had more important things to worry about. It was kind of hilarious and touching and bittersweet. Nothing would stop them from working on that table. Besides, the table wasn't the point: they were their father's children and their grandfather's grandchildren. They were honoring him with what he taught them – helping out where they could with the skills that they had.

During the funeral, one of the ministers said a prayer to support the grieving. He mentioned family and friends and then he focused on my grandmother. He asked G-d to be with her in her time of sorrow and to help ease her transition into life as a single woman. My heart sank and I caught Lucus' eye – one of those “did he really just say what I thought he said?” looks. Because she wasn't single; she was a widow. This might seem like a minor difference, but it isn't. To be a widow is to recognize an identity of someone who has shared a life with someone and then had that someone ripped away by death. To be single is to speak as though that lifetime never happened or that it's irrelevant to understanding who someone is, where they are now. That life and love are not gone and cannot be see easily erased.

We see elders and servants totally baffled by King David in our scripture passage from 2 Samuel this morning. Over the course of his lifetime, he had more than 8 wives and more than 20 children. This child was a result of David taking Bathsheba under the moonlight and sending her loyal husband to die on the front line of war. By this point, David had had other children by other wives, but it didn't matter. The king of the United Kingdom of Israel stopped everything for a

week when his child took ill: no managing affairs of state, no rulings or judgments, no diversions for pleasure. His newborn baby was sick so his prayers became pleadings. He fasted and slept on the ground; he wept and cried out for the life of his child. The elders of his household – probably officials or advisors or councilors – could not understand this. They could not see why he wouldn't eat, keep up with the concerns of the nation, snap out of it. His son died on the seventh day that he was alive. In Israel at that time, male babies were named when they were circumcised on the 8th day. But in his constant vigil, in his fatherly love, he must have had a name in his heart – a name that he was ready to give to his son full of hopes and dreams of his future. But he did not have the chance to give it: not publicly nor officially and so his name is lost to us.

When the child did die, David's servants didn't want to tell him. They were worried that since his grief had been so intense that he might harm himself when he found out. But David saw it in their eyes; he saw it in their nervous whispers and their awkward avoidance. The worst had happened and the child was dead. Defying all that they expected of him, David got off the ground, he cleaned himself up, and he went to the temple and worshiped. He ate food and went back to work. His servants were confounded – how could someone weep and fast and then come back to duty? David replied, “While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept; for I said, ‘Who knows? The Lord may be gracious to me, and the child may live.’ But now he is dead; why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he will not return to me.” When his son was dying, David was a father – not a father first and a king second – he was a father to that little boy. When he lost that little light, he was still a father, but his son was too far for him to reach. He had to be king because he could not connect to his baby like he yearned to. Going back to work is what he had to do to move forward; to survive his sorrow. He did his duty, he cleared out his inbox, but he never stopped being a father to that precious little one. David's final

words in this story resonate with any of us who have struggled with grief, “I shall go to him, but he will not return to me.”

The mercies of the Lord can be harder to see when we face that divide between life and death. We hear verses of such beauty like these from Lamentation: “G-d’s great love is new every morning.” “The Lord is everything I will ever need.” “G-d’s compassion never ends.” But that light doesn’t always feel like it cuts through to the valley of the shadow of death. Like David, we hope and pray that G-d being gracious to us will mean that we get to keep our loved one here with us, healthy and happy.

Ephesians reminds us that in Christ, we are being rooted and grounded in love. Paul writes that, “every family in heaven and on earth takes their name” from G-d. All of our names, all of our identities come from G-d our creator: unnamed babies, those buried in pauper’s graves, millions of people lost to time – G-d knows each one by name. Each of them had a spark of life breathed into them by G-d; each of them housed an infinite, beautiful soul. What G-d holds safe cannot be lost; what G-d loves cannot be brushed aside or erased; what G-d has joined together, no one can separate. G-d is love; Christ is love; the Spirit that moves through our world is love that binds us together. Love strengthened by G-d cannot be broken no matter the breadth or length or height or depth that we think might separate it. With all the saints, we can rejoice in knowing that G-d is everywhere – G-d is with our loved ones who have died and G-d is with us. In Christ, we are connected to them more fully, more perfectly than we ever could under our own power, our own will, our own efforts.

Grief is not faithlessness. The faithful do grieve – that doesn’t mean we don’t believe in heaven, in life abundant, in the promise of rest and peace and paradise that Christ taught us. We grieve because we love; we grieve because we do not feel that our journey is over with the

person that we have lost. Our grief is a longing to be reunited, to resolve what is unfinished, to have love fulfilled. And in Christ, the shadow of death is not darkness; it's just a place that we can't peer into so easily. Paul speaks of this faith in 1 Corinthians 13 "For now we see through a glass, darkly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known." We won't have it all figured out this side of paradise, but we can trust in G-d's unending love and mercy and graciousness. Christ could not be held by the grave and neither shall we. "Now to G-d – whose power at work within us can do abundantly more than we can ask or imagine – to G-d be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen."