

Sermon Jesus Wept

John 11:1-45

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I am not sure you noticed, but this morning we have read the shortest verse in the Bible, in John 11:35. "Jesus wept". That is an amazing statement, as we believe that he is not only a human being, but also the Son of God, yes God himself. "God cried".

That is unbelievable. God cried.

I like to suggest that this vision of a crying God is great encouragement for us. We cry, we have our struggles, life is not all that nice for us, and the sadness we can sometimes feel so strongly, is shared by God himself.

And Jesus wept...

1 The Story

Why did Jesus weep? We know the story of Lazarus. He was, with his sisters Mary and Martha, friends with Jesus. "Jesus loved Martha and Mary and Lazarus." (vs 5)

When Jesus heard that Lazarus was ill, why did Jesus not immediately command Lazarus to be healed? Surely, he could have done this. But instead, he waited two extra days before he went to the home of his friend Lazarus, and he arrived too late. Lazarus was already dead.

Did Jesus want him to die first, in order to do a fancier miracle? I doubt it.

We read that when Jesus arrives at the village of Bethany where Lazarus lived, Lazarus was already 4 days dead.

It is fair to assume that when Jesus, a few days before, heard that Lazarus was ill, he knew that he in fact had already died. And at that moment he knew what he would do.

Death would not have the final word, God has the final word. And because Lazarus would come to life again, God would get the glory and also his Son Jesus Christ.

So Jesus travelled to Bethany, just two miles from Jerusalem. We have on the one hand a clear reference to the greatness of Jesus - the miracle in Bethany - but the story puts his suffering also on the map - this was his last journey to Jerusalem.

His disciples warned him strongly, do not go there. "The Jews are trying to stone you, and you are going there?"

"Yes, I do, Jesus said to them. Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him."

In a sense, this is the story of the Gospel. Jesus faced death in order to make us alive again. John puts the story of the raising of Lazarus in the context of Good Friday. Jesus came to die, to give mankind life.

Then Jesus arrives at the graveyard outside Bethany. Mary was crying, and many Jews had come to weep with Mary and Martha. Everyone was weeping.

If someone died, a whole month of mourning was kept. Especially the first week was set aside for excessive weeping. In those days it was forbidden to wash yourself or anoint yourself. You were not allowed to put on sandals, or to engage in any kind of study or business.

So Jesus arrived in a mayhem of crying and sadness. A worthy beginning of his own final week of suffering. But in the midst of that sadness he had some amazing talks with Mary and Martha.

"Believe in me, and even if you die, you shall live again", he explained. And with the resurrection of Lazarus he made clear that he was not just giving people some sweet fairy tale comfort, but that his words are really trustworthy. He can do it.

For the ancient world, especially for people with a Greek culture, death was horror, the end of everything. The best people hoped for was continued existence in a shadowy world.

Jesus promises that we have hope beyond this life for a better life, and the greatness of this hope is that it is related to him. He himself is the resurrection and the life. He is the one to help us through the grave into His Kingdom. That is not shadowy or vague but very glorious - to be with him!

This hope softens our fear and our pain but it does not cancel it. In the events around the death and resurrection of Lazarus, we do not see much of the joy of Jesus. Everyone is crying, Jesus included.

2 The reasons for Jesus' sadness

In our NIV translation we read that Jesus was "deeply moved in spirit and troubled". The words used by John are actually hard to translate. The Greek means something like, "He was disturbed and snorted like a horse" - he made the physical movements and made the sounds that are the result of deep anger and emotions. It was not a precious single tear....

Everyone weeps, and so does Jesus. But why, he knows that in a few seconds, he will bring Lazarus back to life and all people will be overjoyed.

God knows that the story of this world ends well; in the meantime, he cries for the pain his people go through.

Bad things happen to us, Christians, just as they happen to all people. Now many Christians do not think this is fair, they think God should treat us like Santa.

This complaint about the unfairness of life is not new. St John Chrysostom some 1600 years ago, responded to such Christians who think that they are entitled to an easy life, in his Homilies on the Gospel of John 62.1

Many are offended when they see any of those who are pleasing to God suffering anything terrible. There are those, for instance, who have fallen ill or have become impoverished or have endured some other tragedy. Those who are offended by this do not know that those who are especially dear to God have to -as their lot - endure such things, as we see in the case of Lazarus, who was also one of the friends of Christ but was also sick.

Even the best friends of Jesus suffered sometimes in life. Surely, we know that the story of our life and death will end well, but in the meantime, there is much suffering in the present stage of our story. And especially death is a very foul enemy.

But in the midst of our life's story, God cries with us. Potamius, bishop in what is now Portugal, wrote around the year 350, "God wept, moved by the tears of mortals."

To the pagan Greeks the prime characteristic of the gods was *apatheia*, apathy. A total inability to feel emotions. Because, if you have emotions, it means others can influence you. That means, someone else has power over you. Well, no one can have power over the gods, so they must be apathetic. Without passion, hence, also without com-passion.

What a different picture we get of Jesus. He shows that God's heart is wrung with anguish for the suffering of his people. The greatest thing Jesus did was to show that "God really cares".

When the Jews saw Jesus cry, they said: "See how he loved him", and they were right. This is how he loves those who belong to him.

The Jews thought that Jesus wept because of the death of Lazarus, but in fact he wept out of compassion for all humanity, not mourning Lazarus alone, but all of humanity that is subject to death.

3 Our respons

By proving to be stronger than death, Jesus gives believers confidence and calm in the face of the last enemy. This enemy has been conquered decisively. And one day, Jesus will speak your name and say, 'John, Lois, Stephanie, or whatever your name is, Here, Outside'.

Jesus calls Lazarus by name. Although he is really dead, he has not thereby lost his personal identity: dead people continue to exist, but they have a different mode of existence, because they have changed from mortal life to eternal life. This is why Jesus elsewhere states that God "is not God of the dead, but of the living", for to him all are alive.

Jesus backed up his promise that we shall live, even after death, with action. He is life and He has given it to us, if we by faith hold on to him. Lazarus is our example, the object lesson. Jesus can do and will do what he has promised to us.

I find this a great encouragement. When we think of death, we know that life is stronger; Jesus is stronger. So when the time comes for us to lay our head to rest, on our last day, we can say a prayer: Lord, I will sleep now, but when I wake up tomorrow, I will see you!

Bad things may happen to us, but we learn from this event of Lazarus, that in the midst of our daily life, when the time for resurrection has not yet come, He is with us. When you shed your tears, he does as well. He is not apathetic, but very near and he has compassion. That means, he suffers with you.

Ephrem the Syrian, one of the ancient church fathers, wrote in poetic words,

“His tears were like the rain, and Lazarus like a grain of wheat, and the tomb like the earth. He gave forth a cry like that of thunder, and death trembled at his voice. Lazarus burst forth like a grain of wheat.”

The sadness of Jesus, his tears, were the cause of the miracle; it is this love of God that makes our lives good and that makes our future even better. This is not sentimental love of God - it is love that leads to action, life-giving action.

And often even in our life he comes to your rescue... Our hope is not for some act of God later, but our hope is in God himself and he is always nearby.

What was the message Mary and Martha sent to Jesus? “Come quickly, come and save Lazarus?” The women did not even ask Jesus to come, but they just sent a message that their brother was sick. As if to say, “It is enough that you know. For you are not one that loves and then abandons...”

I read somewhere of two English friends were serving together in WWI. One of them was wounded and left lying helpless and in pain in no-man’s land between the German and the English troops. His friend, at the peril of his life, crawled out to help the wounded man; when he reached him, the wounded friend looked up and said: “I knew you would come.”

The simple fact of human need brings Jesus to our side in the twinkling of an eye. To support you, to help you, to cry with you.

And his tears also teach us how we, who follow him, should weep with those who weep. God is not apathetic, so we cannot be apathetic in regard to the people around us. If in the body of Christ, someone suffers, we all feel the pain. And if among our colleagues and friends, people go through sadness, we will be there to bring comfort.

We cannot live with the Gospel in our heart but not on our lips. We cannot keep what we have for ourselves. The tears that God sheds for us, we shed for others.

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The love he shows for us, we give to others. The practical help he gives, we give to others.

Conclusion

Immediately after Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, he continued his journey to Jerusalem. It was the beginning of holy week - the week in which he would die. Raising Lazarus from the dead was Jesus' strong statement: I am almighty, but I lay down my life, I cry my tears, for the life of this world.

I will die so that you may live.

I am with you, so that you are with me.

I cry my tears, so that your tears will be wiped away.

+In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen