A Sermon for DaySpring

by Eric Howell

*“Sacred Tears”*

All Saints Day

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John 11

In the exalted vision of Revelation, a voice from heaven calls out, “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God. They will be his people and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes.”

The vision is at the same time both epic and intimate. The God of the universe brings all things to completion according to the perfect divine will. Nothing that has happened or will happen can foil God’s ultimate purpose. This is a great promise. And one that is central to Revelation, a love song written to people who are suffering and who fear their darkness may never end. It will. God is still God, and you are beloved. A day will come when we step out of darkness blinking into new light.

The vision of Revelation is a final consolation for all people who have suffered in this life. In Revelation, we are not raptured away from this earth in an escape from it. In Revelation, the movement is downward. God comes down and brings with him all things new. The earth is renewed; all things are made new, and perfect, and right.

In one of the most intimate, tender images in all scripture, God himself wipes away tears rolling down the cheeks of humanity as all the wounds are made whole.

This will be, but it is not fully yet. That day has not yet come, not even with the incarnation. Jesus does not end all suffering even for those who believe in him and follow him faithfully. When God comes in the person of Jesus, he doesn’t wipe away all the tears, but he sheds some of his own. He meets us in our sufferings. There’s no stronger commentary on: “And the word became flesh” than the verse: “Jesus wept.”

Weeping is among the most human things to do. Animals feel pain and whimper sometimes, but they don’t weep tears. Humans are the only species who cry tears. Weeping isn’t just a natural response to pain; it’s an expression of heart, soul, and body. We weep for what we despair and for what we love.

In John’s gospel, death and love are inextricably bound together. For God so loved the world he gave his only son . . .no one has greater love than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. This binding of death and love is tenderly evident in the relationship Jesus shared with the siblings Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. Their friendship, as they would learn, didn’t mean that they would avoid suffering or that Lazarus wouldn’t die. They did suffer. They grieved. And he died. Both of them did: first Lazarus and then Jesus though it seemed to all of them that Jesus had the power to prevent both deaths, if he so chose. Instead, Jesus wept along with them. Jesus did not prevent Lazarus from dying any more than he escaped his own crucifixion. But he was present to that family, ultimately bringing God’s glory into what seemed to be an irredeemably painful experience.

“Lazarus, come out,” he said. And the dead man, wrapped in burial cloth, walked out of his tomb. “Unbind him and let him go.” Jesus unwinds and unbinds the otherwise irresistible force of death that claimed his friend. Unbind him and let him go. And Lazarus, dead and buried and wrapped tight, now alive and set free, becomes a sign for the hope in Christ for all creation.

This is our hope, always the kind of hope that Revelation gives us: that God’s glory will come into what are irredeemingly painful experiences and unbind us and set us free. Those painful experiences are all around us. Into them Jesus is no King Midas, turning everything into gilded bliss. Rather he is first, compassionate messiah, joining with us in the fullness of being creatures, captive to this present darkness. By his identification with us, his love, and his divine power, he sets us free. But first, Jesus wept.

They weren’t tears of simple sadness, though he was heartbroken. Grief is a complex and unpredictable wildfire of emotion. Sadness is part of it. But so are other things for which we barely have language. Jesus is described in this passage as being greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. Even the Greek needs two words to try to get at what he was feeling. English needs more than those. English translators don’t know what to do with those two words, so we end up with phrases like “greatly disturbed in spirit.” What does that even mean? It means something more than sad. The word has a tone of anger to it. Disruption. Frustration. There’s some kind of sharp edge to this emotional blade. Jesus is not just gloomy about something sad that has happened; he’s also feeling the yawing gap between what is and what should be. In the ultimate sense, in the way God intends things by love, his friend should not be dead, but he is. And four days in the tomb hasn’t changed it. Four hundred more won’t change it either. If you’ve ever felt the tightening in your chest when you deal with “this shouldn’t be,” then you’re in the neighborhood of the way Jesus’ emotions are described.

Then something remarkable happened, especially in the gospel of John. John’s gospel goes to great lengths to present Jesus as virtually untouched by human troubles. Got 5000 to feed, no problem. Ran out of wine, I don’t want to deal with this, but I will, and I can. You can raise your glasses while I hardly raise a finger. Dense theological challenges roll off his back as answers to thorny problems roll off his tongue. Everyone else in John’s gospel trip all over themselves; Jesus glides through unaffected. He is the living embodiment of a transcendent, impassible deity if that impassible deity took human flesh. But then, at the death of his friend, the thin plate glass that seemed to separate him from normal people shattered, and his heart did too.

Jesus wept.

Death and love are inextricably bound together in the tears Jesus shed. If you have ever wept for the loss of someone or something you loved . . . if you have ever been hardly able to swallow the bitter pill of “this should not have happened” . . . if your heart has ever broken, Jesus’ has too.

John 11:35. It’s the shortest verse in the Bible but has some of the longest reach. Is there any place in all creation we can imagine where “Jesus wept” does not fit?

Animals are dying. The white rhino this year lost its last male. Soon, it will be extinct. The coral reefs are dying catastrophically and the immense diversity of life with them. Trees are dying. Of the thirteen oldest baobab trees in Africa, nine have died in the last decade. Rainforests the size of every wilderness area in the US combined are mowed down each year to plant soybeans. Jesus wept.

Children are dying of diseases for which there are vaccines easily and readily available.

Wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria. Innocent lives are lost. A whole generation. Jesus wept.

The complex matrix of human tragedy is all around us: abortions, death penalties, drug addictions. Write it in chalk on the sidewalks of gang-riddled neighborhoods. Write it on the walls of every hospital, nursing home. Jesus wept.

Worshippers at a white clapboard Southern Baptist church in Texas, Bible studiers in the basement of an historic black church in South Carolina, teenagers at a high school, Jewish worshippers at Shabbat gunned down in their pews. Jesus wept.

In his weeping, Jesus’ tears fall in compassion for the whole world for what life in this world could be, should be, and for what it is: captive still to suffering and death. Thanks to Wendell Berry that I was introduced to the poem by Hayden Carruth entitled, “On being asked to write a poem against the war in Vietnam.” (Berry, *What Are People Fo*r?, 58.) It’s a poem of frustration at the futility the poet feels in the face of the world’s tragedies.

Well I have and in fact

More than one and I’ll

Tell you this too

I wrote against Algeria that nightmare

And another against

Korea and another

Against the one

I was in

And I don’t remember

How many against the three

When I was a boy

Abyssinia Spain and

Harlan County

And not one breath was restored

To one

Shattered throat

Mans womans or childs

Not one not

One

But death went on and on

Never looking aside

Except now and then like a child

With a furtive half-smile

To make sure I was noticing.

Wendell Berry calls it a poem of difficult hope. And it is, if it is hope at all. The poet takes note of death’s unstoppable malice, and perhaps all poets can do is notice and pen verses of protest. But what about Jesus? Surely the Son of God can do more than notice, more than protest, more than weep.

In a scene repeated in every family where love and death are intermingled, the sister weeps for her brother and her loss. Perhaps all she can do is weep. But the sister thinks someone else could have done something more.

Jesus, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. Her greeting is more than propositional affirmation of Jesus’ supernatural power, though she has seen Jesus heal people. If he did it once he could do it again. Her greeting is also more than a recognition of Jesus’ special friendship with Lazarus, though understandably, Mary may have hoped that their special friendship would afford them special favors.

Her greeting is downright accusation. “If you had been here, but you weren’t here were you...” It turns out there’s a sharp blade to the sister’s grief as well. She doesn’t demand an accounting of Jesus’ delay in coming, but she does everything short of it in just the same way that sparks of faith’s prayers fly at every tragedy: God, where were you? If you had been there, it would not have happened.

It is no wonder why the most beloved eschatological vision is of a time with no tears, exactly because tears are so much a part of our lives. No wonder it is of a time when God is here, making a home among us, when it seems like God can be so far away even in our time of greatest need. No wonder it is a time when death is no more, because death is more and more real the longer you live.

Death and love are woven together, bound by tears. God is love. In Jesus, God endured death. In Jesus, God lives. Do you see yet? The Lazarus story is not just about one friendship, one man’s death. It is about the many deaths and the many sorrows known intimately by the weeping Christ on his way to his cross. The death of Lazarus isn’t a detour on the way to a fated cross. It’s the reason for it. Jesus weeps not just for Lazarus in the tomb or his sister with her head buried in her hands; he weeps not just for himself and the death he will soon endure, and for the sight of a tomb he will soon enter himself, the stone. He weeps for all of us, for all creation, for the dead, the dying, the grieving, the conniving in the shadows opposed to him, and for all the crowds, all of them, and all creation who he has come to redeem. Look close and the Lazarus story is a miracle story for one family. Look again and see this is a sign: a Good Friday and Easter story for all the world.

Jesus wept. But through those sacred tears, Jesus had something to say for the one man Lazarus and on behalf of all creation. The Lord of love and light has come. And victory is mine.

The Lord of life speaks a Word on behalf of all creation:

O despair, that takes away their hope

O darkness, that entombs them

O death, you enemy of God’s children, your reign is over:

“UNBIND THEM AND LET THEM GO!”

The Word of God rolls away stones, opens tombs, shakes the gates of hell, and sets us free to live in the sure hope of God’s life-giving love for this life and this world as we await the one that is yet to come.

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