

THE FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF BURLINGTON  
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“Jesus Wept, and So Should We”  
Preached by the Rev. Elissa C. Johnk

God of the living and the dying and the in-between, use these meditations – my words and all our hearts – to speak to us in this moment, for we are hungry for your truth. Amen.

I’m sure you remember where you were when the planes hit.

And I’m sure you know exactly what I am talking about when I use that phrase – when the planes hit.

On 9/11, I watched on the second floor of Green Hall, on the Wellesley campus, just outside Boston with the rest of my Feminist Theory class as the country ground to a halt.

I remember sitting in my dorm room later that day with a good friend, who hadn’t visited my room yet, because it was early in the year. She was sitting on my bed when the commuter rail went by, and her panic as the building shook slightly was something that will always stay with me.

Her body jumped instinctively; she thought we were under attack.

A decade of ministry, sitting at bedsides, working in emergency rooms, nothing matches her panic from the regular evening commuter rail.

That is, until this week.

It hasn’t been the out-right fear, of course.

But that tight, coiled and weathered look of trauma, like we are all holding our breath.

Like we are afraid to breathe deeply.

Like no one’s body has relaxed overnight, and we all have woken up just as clenched as the night before. Like if the commuter rail went by, we just might jump.

Like if we relaxed... what would happen?

Someone else would get sick?

Someone else would lose their job?

As if by not relaxing, we can prevent something worse.

We are in the middle of a vast, world-wide, communal trauma.  
Not at all unlike 9/11, but on a global scale.

For some of us it's fear for ourselves – confronting our own mortality in a way usually reserved for Ash Wednesday.

For others of us it's fear for our parents, or elders.

For far too many, already, it's economic anxiety. I know a great many of us have already been laid-off, and are wondering what's next. Others have seen their retirements disappear.

For our health care workers it's all of these combined, all the time.

But for all of us it's this unknown. What's coming next, can I handle it, can I prevent it, how long will it last? What do I tell the kids?

And, oh, God, the kids.

I see you, parents, who are trying to hold it all together.

Give them structure and yourself, all while working from home?

Impossible.

As one colleague phrased it: We're disoriented, we're in shock, and there's a surreal quality to our days. We are trying – all of us – to adjust to the new normal, but nothing is normal now. The things that give us structure – school and work and coffee dates or hikes with friends – all of those are gone too. Most of us are working from home, and profoundly compromised in how we do our jobs.

As she wrote: Until this week, I had never sat with a dying person and been unable to hold their hand. It was excruciating. And I know I am not the only one of you struggling with how to do what I do at a distance, how to build my days when they seem so long, and require so much.

Friends, this is what acute grief looks like.

And you have to give yourself permission to grieve.

Our scriptures say that, even knowing his friend was dead – in fact, delaying his visit until *after* Lazarus' death – Jesus went to his grave and began to weep. Alternately translated "Jesus wept" it is the shortest verse of scripture in the Bible.

One of many confirmation classes favorite choices when it comes to memorization.

But what could it possibly mean that Jesus wept?

Why?

Personally, I imagine it was a moment not unlike this one.

Knowing he could not do it all.

He could not minister to everyone.

He could not heal everyone.

As he approached Jerusalem, where they had just tried to stone him, he had to know his ministry would not be complete in his life.

There was death.

There was grief.

There had to be anxiety about what was coming.

And exhaustion.

A sense that his followers still didn't get it – he wasn't doing his job well enough.

A sense that they might not ever get it.

That no matter what he did, there would still be brokenness for the world to fix.

Love, deep love for his friend, and regret at the suffering he had endured with his sickness.

Deep sadness knowing the suffering it was becoming ever more clear he would endure himself.

Jesus wept.

And so should we.

However grief comes to you in this time – in numbness, or anger, or sobs, in anxiety or fatigue – give yourself permission to feel it. Grief works differently in us all.

So be gentle with yourselves, and with others.

Particularly for those of you who are now with someone else more than you probably ever have been in your life.

One of my colleagues, Rabbi Gerson is down in Greenwich, CT where they have been doing this for twice as long as we have now, she put it this way:

College and millennial kids are moving home and regressing, parents have no break from their adorable and maddening toddlers, and all of our kids – from elementary school aged to teens - feel isolated. One congregant told her this week that she's going on daily walks with her teenage daughter, and having better conversations than they've had in years. Another congregant told her that even her husband hasn't seen her real hair color in years, but within a few weeks, he's going to see it again! And other relationships – between spouses now together 24 hours – and between parents and kids, are under tremendous stress. All of us are suffering. So be gentle with each other. With your kids, with your spouses, with yourselves, with your clergy. We are all doing the best we can."

As we discussed in our relationship series, forgiveness and grace are key here.

Which also means, of course, that this is not the time to expect *more* of yourself. As Gerson states, "You do not need to use this time to get in the best shape of your life. You do not need to write the great American novel. You don't need to teach your children Latin and history and pretend you remember how to do trigonometry." This is the mindset that tells us if we have a to-do list we are better off. That we have to be in control of something. But you wouldn't tell that to someone who is grieving, so why tell it to yourself? We are not in control.

And the work of this time is to be okay with that.  
And that's more than enough for most of us to do.

*Jesus wept.*

Jesus paused in his stress, in his endless march from town to town healing and preaching, that schedule must have occasionally felt like a circus, he paused, and he let himself feel, deeply.

He paused in front of the tomb of his friend, and he let his guard down.

It always confuses me when people ask why Jesus wept.  
Why *wouldn't* he weep?

Stress and sadness, of course.

But I'm sure there also must have been deep love.

Deep love for his friend, Lazarus. And Mary, and Martha.

Gratitude for their faith in him, even when angry.

Gratitude, perhaps, that Thomas, knowing it was dangerous, was willing to follow him, even if he didn't seem to understand why.

At the hope their trust gave him, that even though the world was broken, his ministry of healing would continue long after he was gone.

Gratitude, even, for the reminder of why he did what he did. The profound connection he experienced with them. The loss that reminds us of the love we have which reminds us of why we are alive, and the deep, aching beautiful pain of being human.

The deep, aching beautiful reality that, as we sequester ourselves away, the earth, too, is getting a pause from us.

The deep, aching beautiful realization of how precious human touch is.

How breathtaking the view of camel's hump or Lake Champlain.

How healing the sound of laughter.

How essential the need for community.  
How estranged we had become from one another.

The world is hazy right now, but it is not all from heartbreak.

It is also from some form of deep communal remembering, the likes of which I have never seen.

A remembering of what it is that makes us human.

That makes life precious, and wild, and wonderful and hard all at the same time.

Strangers are singing to each other on balconies.

Apartment complexes join together for communal stretching by their windows in the evening.

If you are out walking, people *notice* one another, and smile, and wave, as if to say, *hey, we are all in this together*, because we are.

Nurses and doctors are sacrificing their bodies for others in a very real, very biblical way.

Strangers are shopping for one another.

Here, in this community, we are gathering for prayer almost daily, in a way that hasn't been done for years.

Friends, even though he knew it was coming – and we all know it is coming – for all of us, each in our own time – Jesus wept.

For the brokenness, the hardness, but also for the sweet, yearning beauty of being alive.

The shortest verse of scripture, and perhaps the most powerful.

Because it reminds us of the power of this moment, right now.

This in between time.

When we get to save the world in our pajamas.

You don't have to have all the answers. To do what God wants you to do, right now?

To be the best version of yourself? You don't have to have all the answers. You

don't have to do all the things. As Rabbi Gerson said, "You just have to try to keep

loving each other, and the world, and especially the immunocompromised stranger.

Leave some toilet paper for others. And stay home."

I would only add that Jesus wept, and so must we. For the heartache. For the beauty. And maybe, just maybe, for the hope.