

SECOND PRESBYTERIAN

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“Tears in Plain Sight”

Part II of the Sermon Series “Advent in Plain Sight”

Luke 19:41-44

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It will be a while before I read our passage. My sermon is about tears and our passage is one of many I'll talk about.

Tears.

I went to medical websites and learned what we basically already know. We weep for good physical and psychological reasons. Healthy weeping—not all weeping is healthy—but healthy weeping serves as both a valve and a salve.

- As a valve, tears release emotions.
- As a salve, tears heal psyches.

Because tears relieve internal stress, repressing tears has been linked to a weakened immune system, an inability to cope and even cardiovascular issues.

Psychologically, weeping releases not only emotions but also endorphins which help carry the one in tears to a better sense of well-being. People who think that you have to be either emotional or rational don't get it. Healthy weeping can be the way for better thinking.

Oh, and let's not forget a basic function of washing and lubricating eyes.



The most interesting thing about tears, though, is that human beings are the only species that shed them. If you were looking for physical characteristics that most marks us as human beings, the ability to weep is a good place to begin your list. To try to be someone who never weeps is, in a sense, a denial of one's humanity.

Maybe it is also, in some sense, a denial of our divinity... at least in the sense of our bearing the image of God. Maybe the right kind of tears are sacramental in a sense in that they are a physical means by which we can experience a spiritual connection.

If that sounds like a stretch, well, let scripture stretch you. To take a "Tour of Tears" through the Bible is to go on a long journey with many stops.

You'll find people weeping
in the stories of those who grieve,
and the poetry of the psalms.
You'll read of God hearing cries.
like the cries of a dying baby, Ishmael,
after his mother has left him
because she can no longer bear to hear the cries herself.
or the cries of slaves,
or the cries of Job.
You'll find *God weeping* for his people
Jeremiah says that God weeps because of the way
Judah devastates the land and is unfaithful to him.
You'll find prophets weeping on behalf of God.
Jeremiah sees God's people refusing to listen
and continuing to live in dysfunctional ways,
and the prophet weeps "bitter tears."

And, of course, you'll find Jesus' weeping.

During Lent last year, I spoke of when two of the greatest figures of scripture both wept. You can find what I said as Part 2 of the devotional series, "Along the Way." I told of a bend in the road that goes from the Mount of Olives to Jerusalem. The bend is at the crest of a hill, and to turn on that crest is to suddenly have all of Jerusalem come into view. I've walked that road and it is dramatic.

It is likely that at the bend in the road, perhaps standing on the same spot, two well-known figures of scripture, many years removed from each other, look down on Jerusalem and weep. One is a *last look* since he is fleeing the city and the other is taking a *first look* since he is entering it.

The first is King David, betrayed by his son Absalom who organized a mob to dethrone his father and, if possible, kill him. In fleeing the city, the father does what he does again when Absalom dies in the battle that restores David to the throne: *he weeps*.¹

¹ You can read about his tearful escape in II Samuel 15. The passage doesn't specifically say that he pauses and looks back at the city before it goes out of view, but I cannot imagine David not taking one final look.



A millennia later, Jesus comes to that same bend in the road.
Jesus is coming,
not going;
a mob is welcoming him to the city
rather than expelling him,
and he is seen as the leader of a rebellion,
not the one being rebelled against.

Yet, David's moment and Jesus' moment are joined because each weep for a city that has forgotten the ways of peace.

Listen to Jesus' story as told by Luke:

⁴¹ As he came near and saw the city, he wept over it, ⁴² saying, "If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. ⁴³ Indeed, the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up ramparts around you and surround you and hem you in on every side. ⁴⁴ They will crush you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave within you one stone upon another; because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God."

David weeps, pursued by a mob. Jesus weeps, about to be welcomed by the mob he knows will betray him. It is only a matter of time. Jesus will *not* lead a rebellion against Rome as the mob hopes. When this becomes clear to them, many who now welcome Jesus to Jerusalem with palm branches and shouts of "Hozanna" will be among those shouting for him to be crucified.

But, as I said, I spoke of this story during a *Lenten* devotional. Isn't that where this story belongs, in *Lent*? Why speak of Jesus' tears during Advent? Why speak of tears at all...

- In a season of anticipation of the birth of a child who is God among us,
- in a season when we remember an angel's announcement of good news coming to the poor,
- in a season of celebration and festive decorations?

Why the tears?

A good question, and believe me, I second-guessed this particular passage being chosen to read. I chose to do it because tears do belong in the Advent season.

- Ask any family who will be facing Christmas for the first time without a certain loved one.
- Ask anyone going through a terrible time and for whom the decorations and festivity of the season are not diversions but feel as artificial as the lights on the tree.

If Christmas is going to have any meaning at all, the good news of the God's coming into our lives must speak to their pain. The good news of the coming of God—the good news of a Savior being born—is not fully heard as good news unless it is heard when we weep... and at times when we have cause to weep together.



As to my choosing this passage normally read at Lent? Well, that might have been a mistake. To be honest, I shied away from the passage about tears that is normally read around Christmas. But the story of Jesus weeping over Jerusalem at the end of his life helps us understand the other story of tears that is normally read near the beginning of his life. It also is a story about a troubled Jerusalem and a king... a paranoid king... an insecure king.

King Herod has an audience with foreign dignitaries—"magi" they are called. They came from the east which means they traveled that same road David and Jesus traveled and they rounded that bend in the road where Jerusalem suddenly comes dramatically into view. They are headed to Bethlehem for a reason that interests Herod. He has heard they are looking for a child, a descendant of David who was himself born in Bethlehem. The magi have heard a prophecy that this child, a descendant of David, will be the *new David*, a shepherding-king who will gather the scattered flock of Israel.

Perhaps if Herod were not so paranoid and insecure, he would welcome the possibility that there might be born the one who would one day deliver Israel out from underneath Rome's thumb. But Herod is not David's descendent, and so can't claim lineage as his right to the throne. He is king *not* because he was born to the role but because he was installed on the throne *by* Rome. Herod's rule, while certainly providing him wealth and power trips, must benefit Rome most of all or... well, what Rome gives, Rome can take away.

That is what threatens Herod from above, but there is also threat from below. That Herod is Rome's puppet inspires no devotion from the people Herod rules, and he legitimately fears that what once happened to David might happen to him—a mob is incited to overthrow him, perhaps one day incited by this child of whom the magi speak, the child of whom it is said is a true descendant of David. Herod is a good enough politician to know that a prophecy can come true simply because enough people believe it will come true... Can't let the rumor spread, this rumor that the next David has just been born.

With the magi, Herod acts the part of one who welcomes the possibility of a new king in David's line. He invites the dignitaries, after they find the child, to return to Jerusalem to tell him where the child can be found so that he can go worship the one foretold. They do go and find the child but, warned in a dream *not* to return to Jerusalem, the magi go home by a different route.

Plan B. Herod orders all the children in the region of Bethlehem who are two years or younger to be killed. Matthew's Gospel does not directly describe the weeping of their parents, except to quote a prophet as a verse that joins the parents' cries with the metaphorical cries of Rachel, a mother figure of Israel, weeping over the loss of the people killed or taken at the time of the Babylonian exile.

¹⁸ "A voice was heard in Ramah,
wailing and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be consoled, because they are no more."

The tears of the parents of the children Herod killed are the kind of tears shed by parents of children at



Columbine High,
Virginia Tech,
Newtown Connecticut,
the Sandy Hook School,
Marjory Stoneman Douglas School
and now Oxford High in Oxford Township Michigan.

the cries of parents who cannot be consoled.

In these kinds of moments of wailing, there is not much that can be said that will be heard as good news. At first, perhaps the only comfort for believers is that Jesus weeps with those who weep.

But deep grief truly can be the beginning of healing. We know that as individuals, don't we? We know that to grieve well is to face the reality of what is lost or what is wrong. It is to give up trying to re-write the past or to force a future that simply is not going to play out. But eventually the valve can become the salve, and one's focus moves to what might be... what can be. One walks through the long shadow with God and gets to a better place where even happiness is possible.

I can tell you as a pastor that I have seen this happen many times—individuals who suffered great loss, individuals for whom happiness was impossible in the moment, making it to a day when the weight of living became bearable again—even making it to the day when they can be happy again. It starts with the right kind of weeping, tears shed not of despair but of longing and hope. Out of good grieving can come healing. Out of good grieving can come the determination and courage to be better.

If our theological vision is wide enough, if our faith is deep enough, then maybe we can believe that good news can come not only to individuals but also to broken communities.

As Jeremiah and Jesus can tell us, sometimes it is hard to break through. When Jesus stands at the bend in the road and looks on Jerusalem, he knows that he is not going to be able to enter the city and talk some sense into those who cling to a “Herod Mentality.” This a city divided between

- those catering to Rome-
 - because it is the only way-
- and those who insist Rome must be overthrown-
 - because it is the only way...

a city where innocent people keep getting hurt in the power struggles... a city where Herod's plan works, only 33 years after he thought it would, where a descendant of David is killed to eliminate any threat to the status quo.

Maybe, as Jesus did with Jerusalem then, we should be weeping about communities that forget the ways of peace. Since I mentioned the shootings, maybe we should be shedding tears



over a country that cannot seem to find a way *not* to lead all developed countries in school shootings.

When our tears are for the sake of others, they are sacramental for we join in weeping for those who God weeps. They are a physical means of something holy breaking into human life. They start with the recognition of something that in God's eyes is wrong, or is broken, or lost forever. Then, if we truly honor the tears, there can be planted not only a hope that it can be better, but also a conviction that it must be.

Our passage is telling us that such can be the case with Jerusalem. Such can be the case with communities, cities, and divided nations. The right kind of tears know it should be better and clear the way for a conviction that it needs to be better. Healing can come to communities as much as it can come to individuals. To believe that is to believe precisely what Advent is trying to tell us: God hears our cries and God comes near to us in Jesus.

This is the way the Advent passage of Isaiah 9 puts it. I'll paraphrase it briefly:

Unto you a child is born, unto you a son is given. He is Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow and there will be peace as it was meant to be under David: a peace with justice and right living. God's zeal is that this takes place."

If we join our tears to God's, then we should also join our zeal with his. If we weep over communities that are stuck or lost, maybe we can eventually find ways to discover some of the ways of peace so that in the future innocents will be protected by the powerful rather than sacrificed. Remembering a king who surrendered power rather than clinging to it—a king who sacrificed his life rather than finding the sacrifice of others to be acceptable—a king who showed us a God who came as a child to be near us—is a great place to start.

