
When God Weeps

John 11:32-44

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on November 4, 2012 by the Rev. Dr. Luke Powery

Jesus is up to it again. Not following our plans or protocol. Not taking our advice. Behaving in an unorthodox manner for an incarnate God. Doesn't he know that he's a God and can be exempt from certain things? He's moving in mysterious ways and as usual, full of surprises. Jesus is up to it again, even today as we celebrate All Saints Day, a day of "triumphant joy," according to John Wesley. A day to remember and give thanks for the lives of Christian saints, known and unknown, who have gone on before us, who have gone marching into their final home with God. The saints are, in the words of divinity school professor Rick Lischer, "God's faculty," and they have taught us and continue to teach us the way. We rejoice because we have not travelled this journey alone but are in the company of a great cloud of witnesses, seen and unseen. This is a reason to be joyful so why is Jesus doing what he's doing?

I hear weeping out of the pages of today's pericope. And guess who's a part of the weeping parade? You got it. "Jesus began to weep." Or in the version that I grew up with or as some say, in the language God speaks, the King James Version, "Jesus wept." The shortest verse in the bible contains some of the richest theology for reflection. Jesus wept. How appropriate that this lectionary passage shows up right before the presidential election. Jesus wept. Not because his name wasn't on the ballot, not because he feared that his preferred candidate was going to lose. Not because he was so tired of the political ads though he probably was. But maybe because the political parties have coopted his impartial message into partisan-speak to bifurcate him into blue state Jesus and red state Jesus. Maybe because political party ads have become more important than treating people as human beings created in the image of God, the *imago dei*. Maybe Jesus is weeping because our political affiliations have become little gods that have usurped the throne of God. I don't know, but just maybe. In any case, God moves in mysterious ways and Jesus is up to it again. Jesus wept. Why does Jesus, God in the flesh, weep?

Mary, repeating what Martha had already said, tells Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." They believe in the life of Jesus so much so that they blame him for the death of their brother, Lazarus. Mary is mourning so much that Jesus "saw her weeping and the Jews who came with her also weeping." Weeping is more than tears; it includes wailing and lamentation for the dead. This is not the type of expression one may find with a child who's just stubbed their toe or an infant who needs a diaper changed or a Dookie who just watched the Duke football team lose another game. This is an ancient Jewish expression of mourning and grief. Mary weeps, accompanied by others, perhaps professional mourners, who also weep. As if this was not enough good grief, we then hear that "Jesus began to weep."

Why does Jesus weep? He weeps as an act of solidarity with those who grieve. It is a weeping solidarity that reveals a God who enters the fragility and suffering of human life. This is a communal holy sorrow. Jesus wept to demonstrate that you and I are not alone in the midst of hurt and tragedy and brokenness. God is there even, as the Apostle's Creed notes, descending into hell. Jesus is God with us, even in our weeping.

As I saw these children washed in the waters of baptism, I can't help but think of those who were recently washed in the baptism of hurricane Sandy. The devastating aftermath. You may know people who have been affected in some way—loss of electricity, loss of homes through flood or fire, cars underwater, New York City subways becoming swimming pools, towns destroyed on the Jersey shore, long lines for gas and food, livelihoods lost, death toll rising—"Lord if you had been here, my brother, sister, mother, father, son, daughter, cousin, friend, would have not died." But God is there, weeping right alongside everyone else just as we are called to weep with those who weep, to be a communion of modern day saints through a spirituality of weeping. God joins the company of suffering and opens himself to the wounds of the world. When God weeps God suffers with the suffering world. Jesus wept.

But Jesus weeps for another reason. "Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, 'See how he loved him!'" Jesus weeps as a sign of his love for Lazarus. Not just to be in communal solidarity with Mary and the others, but because he loved Lazarus. In his 1987 book called *Lament for a Son*, about the tragic death of his 25 year old

son, Eric, philosophical theologian, Nicholas Wolterstorff, writes, “If [one] was worth loving, [one] is worth grieving over. Grief is existential testimony to the worth of the one loved....Every lament is a love-song.” Lamentation is a hymn of love for those who have gone before us. Worship is not spoiled by tears nor tainted by pain. Tearless praise is popular in our culture; it sells well. You know what I’m talking about—“happy clappy.” But weeping is not a sign of liturgical weakness; rather it exemplifies spiritual strength. It is not that distorted form of hypermasculine muscular Christianity but it exudes the theo-emotional depth representative of a Christological baptism of love. Jesus wept.

To lament, to weep, is to love. The call to love is a call to suffer, to weep even if it endures longer than the night. This is weeping love. Tearful grief that oozes with love for those gone from this earth—a father, mother, son, daughter, grandparent, best friend, close cousin, work colleague, a former boss. All saints.

Now I understand why the only grandparent I ever knew, Grandma Alice, who was in her 90s at the time, attempted to jump into the casket of her baby son, my uncle Owen, at his funeral. Grandma wept because she loved. When God weeps, God loves. Jesus wept to reveal his suffering love even as he headed in the direction of the cross.

Jesus began to weep as an act of solidarity with and a gesture of love for the world. But his weeping was also a form of resistance to the reality of death. Jesus does not take this web of weeping sitting down. Jesus fights death with holy tears of anger. Twice we learn that he is “greatly disturbed” by what’s happening. Jesus is angry, showing us that anger can be a constructive part of Christian spirituality. He’s angry at the fact of death. He’s not angry with the crowd on the mourners’ bench of life; he weeps too, he mourns too. He weeps angrily at death’s hold on Lazarus and on us.

And we know that Lazarus is dead for sure. Not only is the fact that he is a “dead man” emphasized but as Martha says in her King James tongue, “Lord, by this time he stinketh: for he hath been dead four days.” Death stinks and the lapse of four days in Jewish belief indicated that the death was truly final. This was not a hoax. Lazarus was really dead. And Jesus responds with weeping anger, dissatisfied with even the perception of an eternal death.

The presence of death extracts tears from God. But Jesus does not shrink back from death. Why would he since he’s already said that he’s the resurrection and the life? He confronts death head on. He marches to the tomb and commands that the stone be removed from the entrance. He weeps as he sees death’s grip on Lazarus. He weeps because he knows that there’s more to God’s realm and he yearns for more. He weeps and aches because he is confronted with the absence of life. He weeps over death because he knows there is life and freedom in God. And he is the resurrection and the life. He mourns death as an “aching visionary”(Wolterstorff) and sees the truth about death—that it cannot overcome his life. He weeps as a prelude to the postlude of life and freedom. Jesus is up to it again.

The stones are removed, foreshadowing Jesus’s resurrection and then he cries out, “Lazarus, come out!” The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth” depicted in the stain glass window of Lazarus in the south transept. Dead Lazarus was now alive. The raising of Lazarus is not just about Jesus’s power to raise others from the dead; it is about his power to give new life. It is a revelation of who he is as the resurrection and the life. In other words, God demonstrates in Jesus how he will defeat death once and for all and send hell to hell.

When Jesus wept, he signaled that deliverance was about to come. And boy did he deliver Lazarus. Not only did he raise him and give him new life. He set him free. “Unbind him and let him go.” Jesus knew that people could be walking around the streets of the Research Triangle and still be bound so “unbind him and let him go.” Death’s grip was stripped for a life of freedom and it all began with the spiritual practice of weeping. When God weeps, it is the beginning of the death of death. When God weeps, watch out! New life is on the horizon.

New life is at the Eucharist and Jesus weeps at this table of joyful sorrow. He weeps for those of us who are dead and bound like Christian zombies. His bloody tears flow for the resurrection life we will receive through him. And he will raise you up to set you free from the sting of death on your life. New life is on the horizon. Drug and alcohol addiction, let him go. Self-hatred and low self-esteem, let him go. Bouts of depression, let him go. Suicidal thoughts, let him go. Systems and structures of oppression, let him go. Prejudice of any kind, let him go. Illness and disease, let him go. Feelings of being unloved, let him go. Discouragement

and distraughtness, let him go. Go and be unbound. Go and be free. Go as Jesus weeps and his tears wash us in the baptism of his love that joins us together with the communion of saints from every age.

I have my handkerchief ready as we go. May our weeping begin, knowing that those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy (Psalm 126). And we are not alone in our weeping for as George Herbert writes in his poem "Praise (III)"

I have not lost one single tear:
 But when mine eyes
Did weep to heav'n, they found a bottle there...
Ready to take them in; yet of a size
 That would contain much more.

But after thou hadst slipt a drop
 From thy right eye,
(Which there did hang like streamers near the top
 Of some fair church, to show the sore
And bloody battle which thou once didst try)
 The glass was full and more.

Join the fellowship of weeping in heaven and on earth. Jesus wept. But how about you?