

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

We are drawing near to the end of Lent. Only one more Sunday now before Easter. As I was mulling over the texts for this week in light of the recent personal difficulties experienced by Grace members, including myself, I was wishing that we were in Year A of the lectionary instead of Year B. The Gospel for this Sunday in Year A is the story of the raising of Lazarus, and it contains the shortest verse in the English Bible (two words in the King James Version): “Jesus wept.” In the NRSV it’s translated “Jesus began to weep,” or as my seminary professor rendered it, “Jesus burst into tears”<sup>1</sup> That text seems to fit so much better where a number of us are here at Grace, with several of us facing serious health concerns, with another moving to live near her children because of her own ongoing health issues, and with my father being taken back to the hospital yesterday, it would be comforting to hear about Jesus experiencing the same grief, disappointment, and frustration that we are facing. And I haven’t even told you yet about the deer I hit on the way back home yesterday evening at twilight. I am uninjured, thanks be to God, but I am quite sure the deer is not, and I think my car might be totaled. We’ll have to see what the insurance company says. So, “Jesus wept” would hit home this morning for me, and for some of you.

But the ultimate point of that story of Jesus and Lazarus is not Jesus’ grief or disappointment or frustration. It is about Jesus ushering in a new reality for Lazarus, and also for us, in the promise of life in the face of cold, hard, stinking death. And that is also what our texts today are getting at. Our first reading from Jeremiah is the reading we get every year on Reformation Sunday about the new covenant God promises God’s people. It is a promise that God is making even as God’s people are facing an existential crisis. As a nation you could say that they are as good as dead. They’re a valley of dry bones, to use Ezekiel’s version, which came from how God’s people talked about themselves during the exile. “We’re dead men walking,” they might have said, had they known that more modern expression. Now Jeremiah uses another image altogether, that of adultery, to characterize the relationship between God and God’s people, with the people being the offending party. But I want to make a case for that being very much like Ezekiel’s vision of the dry bones. The adultery image is made in the context of a culture even more patriarchal than our own. In that culture, a woman who commits adultery could be stoned to death, as was about to happen in John chapter 8, that famous passage where Jesus says that whoever is sinless can throw the first stone. In Leviticus, where that death penalty is laid out, it says that both people caught in adultery should be killed, but in John 8, they only bring the woman. What I want us to see is that Jeremiah using the image of adultery for the relationship between God and God’s people, with God being the husband, would signal to Jeremiah’s audience in no uncertain terms that God’s people were “dead women walking.” This is where things would seem to stand. The southern kingdom of Judah has been conquered by the Babylonians, Jerusalem has been sacked, and the temple has been destroyed. Although by all rights and all normal expectations God should abandon them, let them reap what they have sown, God instead promises a new covenant, a renewed relationship, forgiveness that does not point the finger or dwell on past sins, but that instead renews the heart. Because this is a well-used passage, especially in Lutheran circles because of the Reformation connection, we can easily miss how radical this is. But in the ears of its ancient audience, it would be immediately noticed

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<sup>1</sup> See BDAG under *δακρῶω*.

that God is doing something very counter-cultural here, bearing deep hurt and profound shame. And shame in that culture was the worst thing imaginable. Yet God will not do the expected thing. The promise to Adam and Eve, to Noah and his family, to Abraham and Sarah, to Moses and the Israelites, that promise endures, at great cost to God. And just as with all of those other covenants that we have touched on during Lent this year, so here God is making something out of nothing, bringing life from death, and creating anew.

And that, of course, is what is about to happen in the Gospel reading that we do get this year from John, which takes place in the chapter following the one about Jesus raising Lazarus. Jesus in John's Gospel, more clearly than any of the others, is God become flesh, God become one of us, taking on our nature and our lot, to keep the life-creating promise of the covenants with God's people alive. Things have not gotten any better between God and God's people in the half millennium since the fall of Jerusalem and the Babylonian Captivity, or between Jesus and his disciples in the three years he has been with them. The people haven't gotten any more faithful. The disciples haven't yet caught on to what Jesus is up to. But what's happening here in John chapter 12 is the world showing up at Jesus' door in the person of some Greeks, the world, remember, that we have been told by Jesus that God loves. These are Greeks are non-Jewish people who have taken an interest in Judaism and who now take an interest in Jesus. This serves as Jesus' signal that it is "show time," time to be "lifted up" so that the world can see God now taking the sin of the world upon God's self in order to make good on that promise made through Jeremiah, and to empower us to follow in his footsteps.

But Jesus' words here can be hard to hear. "Those who love their life will lose it," says Jesus, and "Those who hate their life will keep it." "I love my life," one of you once told me, "And this text worries me!" You might be thinking the same thing. I think it helps to connect this text to the one we heard last week from John's third chapter: "This is the judgment," says Jesus, that the light has come into the world and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil." It is loving *this* kind of life that is problematic for Jesus, loving life in the darkness, life that is happy with the world as it is, that has managed to make the world as it is work to its own advantage at the expense of others. That kind of life is not life that really is life, and it is that kind of life that has to die so that God can do a new thing in us too.

That, of course, is quite beyond our inclination and capability, and so Jesus will take the task upon himself. He will be the seed that is planted into death in order to bear the fruit of life and love. He will die the death that we need to die, and in doing so he will draw us to himself to take us along on the ride through death to new, authentic, everlasting life. Baptized into the death of Christ with all the faithful of every time and place we are also baptized into his resurrection and new life.

This is the trajectory that we are on as the baptized people of God. It is to this promise that we cling and toward this goal we press. But in the meantime, there remains much to weep about in our lives, plenty of grief and disappointment and frustration. And so, buoyed by the promise of our baptism and encouraged by the power of the Holy Spirit, God turns our focus onto each other, and to the suffering, sinful, hopeless world that God continues to love beyond all reason and expectation, so that we might become God's agents of hope for the life of the world. As we move into these final weeks of Lent, may God continue to work God's love in and through us, and may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.