

“In Life and in Death We Belong to God”  
 delivered Sunday, March 14, 2010  
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 Shandon Presbyterian Church, Columbia, SC  
 Psalm 126  
 4<sup>th</sup> in 4-part series on A Brief Statement of Faith

In life and in death we belong to God. (1)

The writer, Joan, Didion sat down to dinner with her husband, also a writer, John Gregory Dunne, in their Manhattan apartment. Five minutes later, he was dead. She writes in *The Year of Magical Thinking*: “Life changes fast. Life changes in an instant. You sit down to dinner and life as you know it ends...” In her fine memoir about this earth-shattering loss for her, Didion articulates – for all of us who have faced the death of a loved one – that horrible gap in our lives which is so hard to come to terms with. “Grief,” she writes, “when it comes, is nothing we expect it to be.” She feels invisible, she says, and everything appears fragile and unstable. “Grief turns out to be a place none of us knows until we reach it...nor can we know ahead of the fact....The unending absence that follows...dislocating to both body and mind.” She is Episcopalian; her husband was Roman Catholic, but she writes little of practiced religion, though his ashes are interred at St. John the Divine, in something I suspect like our Memorial Garden. What is clear from her experience, and ours, is that grief is a very individual thing, and when we try to shoehorn someone else’s experience into our own, or ours into another’s – it does not always help. (2)

But there is a commonality, I think, in the experience of grief for most of us. It is that sense that we are somehow in a gap – a pause in life – an in-between time, between remembered happiness and some far off future joy. You cannot really see it in our pew bibles because Psalm 126 begins at the bottom of one page and ends at the top of the next. But in most bibles there is literally a gap in the text – a space between verses 3 and 4. The first three verses remember a time of great joy when the Lord had delivered the people of ancient Israel. “... We were like those who dream, then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy...The Lord has done great things for us, and we rejoiced.” Then, there is a pause, a gap in the text, a space between the lines that precedes the next verse: “Restore our fortunes, O Lord,” it says pleading in the present tense that today’s tears may once again become shouts of joy. In both form and content, Psalm 126 shares with us the backward looking, forward hoping pattern of grief that is common to the human experience. When we face the loss of a loved one to death, we recall former seasons of joy – as Israel remembers God’s great acts of redemption in the past; and we long for our tears of mourning to be restored again to laughter. Grief is like that – a kind of gap – a space between what was and what will be, between the memory of the past and a future joy.

Old Testament scholar, Bill Brown, has remarkable insight into what is going on in this Psalm. He says that the agricultural setting of this text in the Negeb – which is an arid desert until the spring rains come and turn it into an oasis – is intended to be a metaphor for grief and longing. When the Psalmist says, “Those who sow in tears will reap with shouts of joy,” it is a proclamation and a promise that the dry land of grief will once again become a joyful place of abundant life and beauty. Bill Brown writes – a wonderful transformation takes place in this desert of grief. “Tears become seeds, watered by tears, and the result is the harvest of joy!” Rather than a condition from which the psalmist pleads for deliverance, tears of grief become

instrumental in bringing about a harvest of joy. Sorrow becomes the means by which the land is restored, and through divine agency, tears, as water, become the means by which lament turns to joy. (3)

How beautiful is that? “Tears become seeds, watered by tears, and the result is the harvest of joy!” The gospel truth of this text is that when we face the mystery of death, God wants us to remember that in that grief filled gap in time, the tears we shed will water the hope of future joy. Those old remembered acts of rescue and liberation and salvation that were planted long ago, assure us – come what may – that God intends for us abundant life always and forever. When the time is right, joy will come again – because from all the saving acts of God in the past, we know that in life, and in death, we belong to God. Those who go out weeping, the Psalmist declares, shall come home with shouts of joy. This is true for each one of us, and it is true for a whole nation – in the Bible it was ancient Israel. In today’s world it is Haiti and Chile which come to mind following the devastating earthquakes that swallowed up so many of their people. Can’t you hear them crying, “Restore our fortunes, O Lord....May those who go out weeping...come home with shouts of joy.”

David Bentley Hart wrote a thoughtful book following the Asian tsunami. He is an Eastern Orthodox theologian and what he said about the tsunami then seems to apply to these places of natural disaster today, as well as our personal stories of grief: “I do not believe that Christians are obliged – or even allowed – to look upon the devastation visited upon the coasts of the Indian Ocean and to console themselves with vacuous cant about the mysterious course taken by God’s goodness in this world, or to assure others that some ultimate meaning or purpose resides in so much misery. Ours is, after all, a religion of salvation. Our faith is in a God who has come to rescue creation from the absurdity of sin and the emptiness of death, and so we are permitted to hate these things with a perfect hatred...Christ will not abandon his creatures to the grave...” Every day, Jesus’ ministry was a battle! He cast out demons, and he healed people from diseases. He opened the eyes of the blind, and he spoke truth into a sea of falsehood. He faced sin, suffering evil – all the powers of death – and never, never did he act as if those forces were part of the intention of God. “They are the enemies of life and therefore the enemies of God.” (4)

Because Jesus himself has died, we know that nothing, nothing – not even death itself – can separate us from the love of God. Long before Jesus, the writer of Psalm 126 helped people remember how God had been with them in the past, restoring their fortunes, and filling their mouths with joy and laughter. In the midst of some kind of crisis, that memory is all they needed to trust that God would bring them back to life again. Then, centuries later, through Jesus, God makes that promise again, this time, up close and in person. Jesus Christ is all we’ll ever need to bring us back to life again.

So, as we move toward the end of this season of Lent, this has become a kind gap in time for us, and surely it is for God’s children in the world. Far too many are suffering a season of grief and unbearable loss – loved ones lost to death, lost jobs, ill health, hopes for peace dashed against the realities of war – you name it – we’re in this in-between time. We stand in the history of the people of God, though, and we have a happy memory of a long go restoration to hang onto, when we were more fortunate and filled with laughter. And that is all we need to make our way forward, as we walk with Jesus toward the cross, along a path that has been watered by tears, and we await Easter’s redemption, when we shall come home with shouts of joy. AMEN.

## NOTES

- 1) A Brief Statement of Faith, Confession of the PC(USA)
- 2) I am grateful to friend John Wilkinson, whose sermon “The Limits of Bumper Sticker Theology,” Third Presbyterian, Rochester, 3/26/06, reminded me of this book and whose excerpts I use from pages 26 & 188-189.
- 3) William P. Brown, *Seeing the Psalms: A Theology of Metaphor*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002, p. 120.
- 4) Grateful to Tom Are’s “Cross Talk... the Way of God’s Power,” Prairie Village Church, 1/17/10, for this citation from Hart’s book, *The Doors of the Sea: Where Was God in the Tsunami?* P. 115.