

A Sermon for the 5th Sunday in Lent, March 8, 2008
Immanuel Episcopal Church, Hanover County, Virginia
by The Reverend David H. Knight, Interim Rector

Sometimes it is Christ who calls,
Come and see the rising light.
Sometimes it is we who cry,
Come and see our long, dark night.
In both bright and shadowed place
we meet God's life-changing grace.

From Songs for the Cycle by Michael Hudson

“When Mary came and saw where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and and to him, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.' When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, 'Where have you laid him?' They said to him, 'Lord, come and see.' Jesus began to weep”.

Jesus wept. While the New Revised Standard Version is the most accurate translation of the original Hebrew and Greek texts of the Bible, earlier translations paint a more vivid picture of this moment in Jesus' ministry. We are told simply, ” Jesus wept.” It's the shortest sentence in all of Scripture. It is one of the most important sentences in all of scripture. It is important because it gives us a picture that becomes etched forever in our memory. We see in Jesus the image of a God whose heart is wrung with anguish in the presence of the anguish of God's people. At this very moment at the tomb of Lazarus where the family and friends were in grief, Jesus brought to them the news that God cares and that God is present with them in the midst of their anguish. Of all the lessons the Gospels can teach us, I am convinced beyond a shadow of a doubt, that this is the most important lesson of all. God is present with us in our anguish whether it's the death of loved one or, perhaps being confronted by a long term illness.

Just as Mary asked Jesus, it is not uncommon for one to ask when tragedy strikes, “Where was God?” In our feeble attempts to explain the unexplainable, we sometimes attribute to God the reasons something took place. There is the legend in my family, for example, that when my uncle Monty died at age 43 from cancer leaving a young wife and three small children, some well-meaning soul said to Aunt Emily, “God needed him in heaven.” As the legend goes, that person probably never said that again to anyone. Aunt Emily knew better. She set the woman straight. “Only a selfish God would do that” she was reported to have said. My memory of her is that in her dignified yet direct manner, she could set the record straight. She knew the truth about God.

Sometimes young children, unencumbered by misinformation, see things as they really are. I share with you the story of one such little girl. I do so with the permission of her family. Early last September as many of you may recall, there was the tragic death of a young woman, Becca, a doctor who was killed while on a hay ride at a pre-wedding gathering outside of Fredericksburg. A few days after Becca's funeral, the family shared with me a conversation between Becca's 5-year-old niece and her daddy. Trying as hard as he could to explain this incomprehensible tragedy to his little girl, he explained, “God needed a doctor in heaven.” Little Mae Wallace looked puzzled. She asked her daddy, “But if there is no pain and suffering in heaven, why would God need doctors?” Young children often can speak the unvarnished truth about God.

If we remember nothing else in today's Gospel, let us come away from this day with the image

etched in our minds of Jesus as he wept with his friends over the death of Lazarus. But let us also come away from this day with the image etched in our minds of how Jesus then went on to do what had to be done. In this case he brought life back and Lazarus was raised from the dead. Jesus then told them all that he was the resurrection and the life.

In our journey together this lent as we come closer to Easter, an important piece of the journey is that of walking the way of the Cross. It is important for us to walk with Jesus down the path and as he suffered anguish, and suffered that anguish for us. He took upon himself the suffering we experience so that through him our suffering could be transformed. In this light, I commend to you the services of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, the Good Friday services being restored to our tradition here at Immanuel, though they've been part of the Church's journey of Lent from the beginning. Only if we have experienced in some way Jesus' Passion, can we fully experience his resurrection from the grave on Easter Day. It is in these progression of days that you and I have a sense of the progression from despair to hope which is a reflection of life as it is. A loving God wants no one to suffer without the promise of hope. A loving God does not cause suffering. A loving God weeps with you and with me and with all who suffer loss. But a loving God's presence doesn't stop there. That love becomes a steadfast presence through the suffering and to the time when we once again experience hope again, hope in whatever form it takes.

Jesus wept. Tears are a gift. It is a known fact that the content of tears themselves have a cleansing effect that is different from that of simply having watery eyes. Tears cleanse the body and the soul. In tears, the healing process begins to take place, even if ever so slowly. And so, we weep with our friends in the time of a loss. It is a way in which we share in their journey in whatever small way we can. And then in addition to the tears, we do all we can to be present in ways that are helpful as God carries out the task of bringing hope and resurrection back into their lives.

I have a vivid memory, for example, of sitting with Nora and George in the living room of their home on Jefferson Street in Winchester some years ago. Their daughter, Beth, a young teacher with a promising life before her was tragically killed in a car crash on I-81 down in Whytheville. I remember Jim Flemming who was with the local funeral home coming to the door that Monday afternoon in November. It was a cold, gray day. When he came in he hugged Nora and George. He put his arms around them. He wept. Moments passed. Then we all sat down and he gently carried them forward as we began to make plans. He wept and then he did what had to be done. And I remember well, 11 years ago, when Doug Burgoyne, that magnificent soul who led our vestry retreat this weekend, coming to our front door after he had heard the news about our Jamie. He wrapped his arms around us. He wept with us. Then, over the days that followed, and over the months which led to several years of court proceedings in the trials and appeals of Jamie's killers, Doug was there with us through all. Jesus weeps with us, yet then he does what needs to be done. Jesus remains with us as we begin to pick up the pieces.

I have tried to share all these examples this morning, not in an effort to be morbid, but rather as an effort to relate the lives we live to the incredible compassion of God whose heart is wrung with anguish when we are in anguish, or when anyone in the world God has created is in anguish. The most precious gift God has given to you is the news that God cares, and not only that God cares, but that God can bring resurrection from death and that you and I can have hope once again. *Amen.*

