

“If Only You Had Been Here”

Ezekiel 37:1-14

Psalm 130

Romans 8:6-11

John 11:1-27

Obedience is responding faithfully even in depression. Listen carefully to this story of a father’s grief after his son’s tragic death:

In his book *Unspeakable*, Os Guinness tells the story about a well-known Christian leader whose son had been killed in a cycling accident. Although the leader was devastated, somehow he managed to suppress his grief, even preaching eloquently at his son’s funeral. His display of hope in the midst of tragedy earned him the admiration of many. But a few weeks after the funeral, the man invited Guinness and a few friends to his home. According to Guinness, this man spoke and even screamed “not with the hope of a preacher but with the hurt of the father—pained and furious at God, dark and bilious in his blasphemy.” In his agony, he blamed God for his son’s death. Rather than rebuke him, one of Guinness’s friends gently reminded the enraged father of the story of Jesus at Lazarus’ tomb. On three occasions in that story, Jesus expressed anger, and even furious indignation, in the presence of death. When Jesus came to earth, he became a human being just like us, feeling the abnormality of our suffering. In Jesus’ humanity we see God’s perspective of our pain: the beautiful world God created is now broken and in ruins. Jesus will heal this broken world and our broken lives, but first, he came to earth in order to identify with our anguish. Guinness concludes that when we understand Jesus’ humanity, it frees us to face the world’s brokenness just as Jesus did. Like Jesus, we must never accuse God of wrongdoing or blaspheme God, but like Jesus, we are “free to feel what it is human to feel: sorrow at what is heartbreaking, shock at what is shattering, and outrage at what is flagrantly out of joint To pretend otherwise is to be too pious by half, and harder on ourselves than Jesus himself was.”¹

Yes, admitting our anger and frustration at God, and even blaming God for whatever is happening in our lives is important. Yes, and even admitting being depressed. Admitting authentic human brokenness is so important for moving through the grieving process to the other side. Yes, obedience is responding faithfully even in depression.

¹Adapted from Os Guinness, *Unspeakable* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 144-145.

The texts in Ezekiel 37:1-14, Psalm 130, Romans 8:6-11, and John 11:1-27 reveal that obedience is responding faithfully even in depression.

In John 11:1-27, Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha was ill, and they sent word to Jesus to come. Jesus sent word back that Lazarus' illness would lead to testimony of God's glory. Something would occur through Lazarus' illness and eventual death that was bigger than life. Jesus did not come immediately. He stayed two days longer where he was before he and his disciples returned to Judea. When Jesus arrived, Lazarus had been dead four days. What ensues is a discussion about life between Jesus, Mary, Martha, the friends that had gathered, and the disciples. Yes, Jesus resuscitated Lazarus from the dead and Lazarus lived to die another day. There is a deeper lesson, however. Yes, it is a harbinger of Jesus' resurrection yet to come. More profoundly, it is a lesson about compassion, authenticity, and vulnerability pointed toward the brokenness of the human spirit. The human spirit can be resuscitated today, brought back from the dead, in and through a believing faith in Jesus Christ. Jesus said to Martha in John 11:25-26, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" This is a profound word to Martha, particularly in a circumstance that most likely led to depression. From Martha's perspective Jesus had not arrived soon enough.²

²In the three paragraphs of textual analysis above, I have benefited from the thinking of Rebecca Abts Wright, Jane Anne Ferguson, John W. Wurster, Jerome F. D. Creach, Sally B. Purvis, Andrew Nagy-Benson and Michael L. Lindvall as found in Joel B. Green, Thomas G. Long, Luke A. Powery, Cynthia L. Rigby and Carolyn J. Sharp, editors, *Connections, Year A, Volume 2* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2019), 93-95, 95-96, 97-99, 100-101, 102-103, 104-106, and 106-108.

Today is The Fifth Sunday in Lent. Through authentic self-awareness, we're not to be intimidated or threatened by circumstances that cause depression. We belong to God and one another. We are supported by God and others in times of depression. Mary and Martha must have been depressed. From their perspective, Jesus arrived four days late. Lazarus had been dead for four days before Jesus arrived. Did Jesus really not care about Lazarus or them by staying away so long?

Allow God to bring new life to your dry bones and damaged spirit. God has not abandoned you. God is with you. We know these things through a believing faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of God. How will you respond to the life-giving power of God for you? Be resuscitated by Jesus. Exude as much faithfulness as you can in times of depression. Embrace the raw authenticity of life. Listen to Jesus. Experience Jesus. Show people Jesus in your words and deeds, yes, even in times when you are angry, frustrated, and even blaming God. Remember, obedience is responding as faithfully as you can even in depression. Quoting Jim Tozer, former pastor at Covenant Presbyterian Church in West Lafayette, Indiana, "Give as much of yourself as you can to as much of Jesus Christ as you understand." Amen.

*This sermon was preached (for the In-Person and Livestream congregations)
on Sunday, 26 March 2023 by the Rev. Dr. Steven M. Marsh
at Geneva Presbyterian Church in Laguna Woods, California*

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