

Last week I preached on God's response to Job. Job questioned God in the midst of his suffering and God responded by convicting Job of his pride or hubris. God put Job in his place. Job repented and his life was restored.

My worry in that sermon was that there was not enough compassion for the sufferer. Someone who has lost a child or a wife, for instance, and cries out to God in agony and sorrow does not, perhaps, need to be put in his place. He needs more from God than "Can you make a gorilla? – No? Then, be quiet." Although I did say that God not only puts us in our place, He takes our place so that we might live, there is more to say about God's response to suffering and hurt.

Our All Saint's Day Scriptures give us the more to say about God's response to suffering and hurt. In our gospel reading we see how God relates to suffering. And in our reading from Revelation, we see how God redeems suffering. He relates and He redeems.

The story of the raising of Lazarus is long – almost all of John chapter 11, with lots of detail and dialogue. Yet in our reading for today we have the very center of how God relates to our suffering. It's the shortest verse in the Bible – just two words: *Jesus wept*. Jesus' friend Lazarus has died. So Jesus does what people do when they grieve – he cries. He cried with Martha and Mary, Lazarus' sisters.

God is deeply moved by sorrow and injustice and death. He is not remote. We see this in the shortest verse in scripture: *Jesus wept*. Though he did not save his friend from death, he comes to his tomb and weeps for him. Verse 33 says he is "deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled".

Today we'll sing "There's a Wideness in God's Mercy". There is a line in the hymn that tells us how God relates to our suffering and hurt. "*There's no place where earth's sorrows are more felt than in heaven.*"

e.e. cummings wrote a beautiful poem that captures God's identification with us in our sorrow and hurt.

here is the deepest secret nobody knows  
(here is the root of the root and the bud of the bud  
and the sky of the sky of a tree called life;which grows  
higher than the soul can hope or mind can hide)  
and this is the wonder that's keeping the stars apart  
i carry your heart(i carry it in my heart)

God carries you in His heart. Jesus carried his friend Lazarus in His heart and when Lazarus died, Jesus wept. The Scripture tells us to do what Jesus did - *weep with those who weep.*

Many of you know that when I was 19 years old I was driving recklessly and crashed. My best friend, Drew, lost his right eye in the wreck, because I was playing a speeding game. As you can imagine, I was not only devastated by what I had done, but deeply ashamed. It happened in the summer between my first and second years at UVA, and when I returned to school in the Fall I didn't want to talk about the experience with anyone. I was too sad and ashamed.

Finally I shared my experience with a friend named Jenny; sadness and shame ruin a person if kept under cover. I remember exactly where I was – on the Corner next to Littlejohn's. As I talked, I hazarded a look at Jenny to gauge her reaction. Tears were streaming down her face. Jenny was crying, empathizing with the sadness of the situation. Jenny gave me warm tears of sadness, rather than harsh words of judgment. Jenny's tears meant the world to me; her tears helped heal me.

The verse in "There's a Wideness in God's Mercy" that follows "There's no place where earth's sorrows are more felt than in heaven" is "there's no place where earth's failings have such kind judgment given." That's what Jenny's tears gave me – sympathy and understanding, right in the face of my horrific failure, the failure that haunted me in nightmares and still today can taunt me with guilt.

Though we may find that sympathy in others, there is finally only one place to go to receive that healing sympathy in its perfect form. We read in Hebrews that Jesus gives us this perfect healing sympathy. "*We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.*" There is no note of judgment – other than the kind judgment of the hymn. So, the writer continues, "*let us then with confidence draw near the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.*"

So God relates to your suffering with His own tears. And how could He not? He carries you in His heart! So in your time of need, come to His throne of grace that you may receive mercy and find grace. God relates to your suffering.

God relates to your suffering, but thankfully that is not all. His tears are not the end of the story. Grieving people need more than tears. There was a whole lot of talking in seminary about the so-called "ministry of presence." In times of crisis and loss, of course it is important to be with people and remind them of God's presence – just the kind of thing I've talked about in the first part of the sermon. But, in the end the mother who has lost her daughter in a car wreck, doesn't want me! She wants her daughter back!

And this is just what Martha and Mary wanted in their time of grief they wanted their brother back. So Jesus, after he wept, gives them their brother back. Jesus calls

Lazarus back from his 4-day grave. Lazarus, Come out! And the dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth. Lazarus was alive again.

So God not only relates to your suffering, He redeems your suffering. Granted, we don't usually see His redemption in the dramatic form of today's gospel reading, but we do have His promise that all of our suffering will be redeemed.

I'll just say once again that promise from our Revelation reading. *"Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes and death shall be no more, neither crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."*

God first sheds His tears, but then wipes away our tears Himself. That's such a tender image, that God Himself will dry our eyes. Sometimes the suffering is so great that we don't even have the strength or ability to wipe our own tears. Yet, God, like a loving parent, takes us in His lap and wipes our tears away with His own gentle hand.

What I believe and trust, is that Drew will be there, but now with two eyes, the lost one restored, as God Himself wipes away his tears and mine. And the same is true for you in whatever is your sorrow - it will be redeemed, your tears will be wiped away by the One who carries you in His heart.

Today, on All Saints Day, we read aloud in prayer the names of those who have died at Christ Church this past year – since the last All Saints Day. The list, of course, is not just a list. Each name is an empty chair at the Christmas table, or one side of the bed that is now cold, or a silent living room. Alison, William, Alice, Benjamin, Betsy, Brenda, Judy, Thomas. And there are others in your life, who are now no longer in your life. And for these people, Jesus wept.

But we are also here to say, that for these people Jesus also died and rose again! Like Lazarus they have been called out and now live. In the word of the hymn, *"There is plentiful redemption in the blood that has been shed; there is joy for all the members in the sorrows of the head."* God relates and God redeems.

He is making all things new;  
these words are trustworthy and true.

Amen.