

Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church, Hatfield
All Saints Sunday, November 7, 2021
Pastor Nancy M. Raabe + “Dangerous Acts” (John 11:32-44)

Today we are talking about dangerous acts. Not Jesus’ raising of Lazarus, which sealed his death warrant with the Jewish and Roman authorities, but the dangerous act of his public demonstration of emotion.

We have seen Jesus angry before, but never has he bared human feelings more openly than here. The New Living Translation gives us a better view of verse 33: “When Jesus saw Mary weeping and saw the other people wailing with her, a deep anger welled up within him, and he was deeply troubled.” That word actually means, “he shuddered.” And then, right in front of everyone, Jesus weeps -- for Lazarus and for himself because he knows what is to come.

What is this deep anger that causes Jesus to shudder? He is angry at the power and finality of death, that death brings a separation that we cannot begin to comprehend, and a grief that is beyond anything we can imagine being able to get through.

To hear the promises of today’s texts, we must first grieve the terrible reality that death has swallowed up our loved ones. The mother who was our anchor in all aspects of life--gone. The once-brilliant father whose life slowly dissolved into the mists of dementia--gone. The spouse with whom we planned to sail into the golden years--gone. The son who gulped exuberantly at life as if he could never get enough of it--gone. The daughter who was the shining apple of our eye, our heart’s treasure, our hope for the future--gone. The infant who never even had a chance to grasp at life--gone. In the midst of this, why should we not cry, with Mary: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died!”

Looking death in the face is a dangerous act. We don’t know how we will respond. Because there is no road map for grief, we have no idea where it will take us.

How much safer, then, to hide from it. Modern burial practices today enable this hiding. We do not prepare our loved ones’ bodies. We do not dig graves by hand. We do not lower the casket into the ground. We are even not allowed to see the gaping hole which is covered by an astroturf rug. What then becomes of the flowers? Instead of flinging them into the earth as Queen Gertrude did onto Ophelia’s grave, the funeral director politely hands each family member a single stem that they carefully replace on top of the coffin. We don’t even get to witness the casket being lowered in because everyone must first leave the cemetery. It’s almost as if the modern funeral is a ceremony to which death isn’t invited.

Ancient cultures, though, made space for lament. The Book of Psalms is shot through with searing expressions of loss. An ancient Jewish text on funeral processions advises that “even the poorest in Israel should hire not less than two flutes and one wailing woman.” Did you hear that in the NLT version of verse 33? “When Jesus saw Mary weeping and saw the other people wailing with her....” The whole procession was wailing in grief.

What has become of our wailing, our lamenting?

Last December, I led a graveside service on a frozen Wisconsin hillside for a member of my former congregation. 'Grandma Betty,' as she was widely known, was everyone's favorite grandmother. She delighted in my visits and peppered them with wisdom and humor. Her death was a shock: She was in her garage unloading groceries to bake her usual multiple batches of Christmas cookies when a massive stroke knocked her to the ground. She died a few days later.

On the day of the graveside service I arrived early to a deserted cemetery, and off in the distance spied a small urn atop a little pedestal. Because it was too cold to be outside any longer than necessary, I drove closer and then sat for awhile in my car, letting the reality course through me of this vibrant person reduced to dust and then left all alone in her little box in the bitter cold.

When family members finally arrived, I led the usual service, adding a hymn Betty had told me she wanted. But neither this nor all the consoling words from scripture brought any tears. They just all stood there, expressionless. Were they not devastated to lose their mother, their grandmother? The one who held the whole family together? Then a grandson pulled out his phone and asked if he could play something. Of course, I said. It turned out to be...polka music! Immediately tears began to flow. Family members turned, hugged each other, and broke down on each other's shoulders. Then suddenly the music broke off. The wifi connection had been lost. All of a sudden the grieving stopped, too. They returned to their stone-cold faces, and that was it.

What allowed them, for a few moments, to experience the rivers of loss that were dammed up beneath the surface? It was a ritual that lifted them out of themselves--in this case the ritual of polka music. Rituals can open us to the vast oceans of the human experience we share in common, in a way that words cannot.

Seek these rituals when you can. Because only when we squarely face the devastation of death, only when we feel the fullness of its finality, can we receive with full hearts the great promise that we hear today: That while formerly death had swallowed up everything in its path, now God will swallow up the swallower. Death, and mourning, and crying, and pain WILL be no more. Knowing this, we sing with Isaiah: "This is the Lord for whom we have waited: Let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation."

Paul proclaims in Romans 6 that because Christ was raised from the dead, death no longer has power over him, and therefore it has no power over us. This is the truth out of which Jesus calls to you today: "Come out!" Come out of the tomb of guilt you shut yourself in because you thought there was something you should have done to prevent the death of your loved one. Come out of the fortress of anger from which you have been waging war on God because of something you think God could have done. Come out of your prison of isolation. Come out of your straitjacket of numbness. Come out from the closet you've been hiding in because you're afraid people won't know what to say, or that they'll say the wrong things. They won't, and they will. It's OK. Just come out, because Jesus is right there waiting to unbind you and let you go.

And new life what awaits you, unbound? A return to community. A life of giving and service. Let's take our cue from Lazarus himself. Just a few verses later in John we meet up with again, and what is he doing? hosting a dinner party for Jesus! So come out, and be a living witness to the life-giving power of God. Amen.