

“Why are you so full of heaviness, O my soul?”

Psalm 42

John 1:1-5, 10-13

In verses 5 and 11, the psalmist asks the question twice – “Why are you so full of heaviness, O my soul?” the psalmist knows his sadness. I know my sadness during these short days of winter which lead many of us into some level of depression. When we are sad, we all know that we are sad. But we do not always know the source of the sorrow, and like the psalmist we have to ask, “Why?”

“Why are you so full of heaviness, O my soul? And why are you so disquieted within me?”

What causes the sadness – even in seemingly good times?

Why, for example, does the mother of the bride, who truly desires best things for her daughter and who genuinely loves this son-in-law, weep at the wedding as though it were a funeral?

Well, because it is, in a sense, a funeral.

Or why, when a man has finally achieved the freedom of retirement and now can putter to his heart’s content at things that give him greatest pleasure, does he sigh and descend to a sorrowful silence as though his dearest friend had died?

Because a dear one did die.

Almost all our sadness has the same cause, though that one cause of sadness comes in many different forms. Sometimes the form is extremely evil and we try to forget it, like being abused in childhood.

But sometimes its form is that of the natural changes in human life; and so we scarcely recognize the cause at all. Yet all these, the causes of sadness, are at the core the same: the children growing up and leaving home, betrayal by a trusted friend, the surgery that took a breast, marital divorce, the loss of a house by fire, the increasing loss of freedoms with advancing age and eventually moving into a nursing home, the loss of a dear one to the casket and the grave.

The details change, but the cause and the sorrow are always the same. The experience is universal. No one born to human flesh is ever exempt. Not one.

The cause of all our sadness is death.

Since life is experienced only and always in relationship with one another, relationships in family, friends, workplace, church, the sundering of any of these relationships is death, a little death along the way or death at the end of a loved one's life.

And sadness follows. And the name of our sadness, whether it be the weeping at weddings or the weeping at a funeral, the name of our sadness is grief. When there is death we grieve.

Death doesn't wait till the ends of our lives to meet us and to make an end. Instead, we die a hundred times before we die; and all the little endings on the way are like a slowly growing echo of the final Bang!

Just as baby Jesus while growing up will experience many little endings on the way to his Good Friday cross. He will be rejected.

Our gospel reading from John elegantly sums up his life.

John 1:10-13 . . . ¹⁰He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. ¹¹He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.

¹²But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, ¹³who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

Again the psalmist puts it well. “Why are you so full of heaviness, O my soul? And why are you so disquieted within me?”

And the psalmist’s answer, also for us all, is this: He has suffered the break of significant relationships.

He feels severed from God and the pain that is causing him when in verse 9 he asks the question, “Why have you rejected me, and why do I wander in such gloom while the enemy oppresses me?” He has been broken from his God. The isolation is like a killing thirst, the parched, exhausted thirst of being chased into the wilderness and needing life restored by the cool water.

Verse 2 . . . “I thirst for God, for the living God; when shall I come to appear before the presence of God?”

His relationship with God has broken down. He is sad. He is grieving in the next verse.

Verse 3 . . . “My tears have been my food day and night, while all day long they say to me, where now is your God?”

And then in verses 4-5, he explains his feelings, his grief. Listen to these words.

“I pour out my soul when I think on these things: how I went with the multitude and led them into the house of God, with shouts of thanksgiving, among those keeping festival.”

The psalmist is divided from his friends and the singing community, from a gladness that once sustained him. But worst of all is the internal divorce, the breaking of himself from what he

had become in this worshiping community. He had been their leader and now he would no longer lead. He is cut off from his old role in the community and this separation gives him spiritual and physical pain. His most necessary and cherished relationships are broken.

What is such a condition? What shall we call it? Death. This is the name of the breaking of relationships: Death.

Verse 7 . . . “One deep calls to another in the roar of your cascades; all you rapids and floods have gone over me.”

His brokenness makes him as helpless as a man sucked under the furious flood. His solitude feels like one whirled in the roaring horrors of chaos, drowning. This is the name of the breaking of relationships: death.

“Why are you so full of heaviness, O my soul?”

The psalmist not only names the cause; he communicated in powerful poetry how it feels to die.

Does this news of death, of separation distress some of you? Well, I can see that it might.

We spend a good deal of energy and intellect avoiding the notion of death altogether. It comforts us to banish our own dying to the distant, unthinkable future. And we tend to limit death to physical expiration, that final moment at the end.

But consider how often grief overtakes and bewilders us along the way. And we resist and fight it as if against any enemy. In fact, grief is not an enemy. It hurts, to be sure. But it is the hurt of healing.

Grief is the grace of God within us, the natural process of recovery for those who have suffered death, exactly as the slash in my leg, with scabs and pain, and itching, healed. Grief is the knitting of wounded souls.

Yes, there is an enemy stalking about, one so close to grief that it is easy to mistake them. But that's all the more reason to name and distinguish the two: not grief, death is the enemy! Little deaths along the way and death at the end.

But consider again how much of the Good News of Christ is devoted exactly to this, that we have victory over death.

You have a present Savior with whom to meet and wrestle a present death. And the more you recognize death around you, the sweeter will seem the love of the Lord. You will know him better. You will realize the power of his salvation – for whatever death is, there can also be his glorious victory. With that victory in you heart, you may stride with freedom through the difficulties, grief and the hard road, mourning and bereavement.

If the Gospel seems irrelevant to our daily lives, that is our fault, not the Gospel's. For if death is not a daily reality, then Christ's triumph over death is neither daily nor real. Worship and proclamation and even faith itself take on a dream-like, unreal air, and Jesus is reduced to something like a long-term insurance policy, filed and forgotten – whereas he can be our necessary ally, an immediate, continuing friend, the Holy Destroyer of Death and the Devil, our own beautiful Savior.

In our gospel text for this morning, Jesus is the light that shines in the darkness.

John 1:1-5 . . . ¹In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God.

³All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

“Why are you so full of heaviness, O my soul?” The light shines in our darkness. Jesus is the light of the world.

May the peace of God . . .

#307 – Light Shone in Darkness