

Grace to you, and peace, from God, the Creator and from Jesus, the Christ, Amen.

Have you ever noticed that sometimes, a story can change everything? Here's one I heard recently from a friend of the congregation shortly after my mother died last January:

"When my daughter Jessica was four," she writes, "I was putting her to bed one night when she asked me, 'Who do you love more: God, or me?' (That's quite a question to a parent from a four-year-old!)

"It took me a few moments to respond, she continues. "I told her that I loved her *more* than God, because she was right there with me, and I could hold and hug her.

Her answer was, 'God will understand.'"

God will understand. Now initially when I heard these words, I felt as though an immense burden had been lifted. Why? Because for weeks after my mother died, I couldn't pray to God. I could only talk to my mother. In so doing, I felt guilty. After all, as we read in the book of Exodus, as well as in the work of the prophet Nahum, "the Lord our God is a jealous God" who demands our absolute fidelity, loyalty, focus and trust. Yet here, in the words of a child, spoken from the mouth of babes, as Jeremiah says, came a consoling counter-perspective. Three simple words: "God will understand." God will understand.

Now it's true; the Bible does say that ours is a jealous God. And the context for this is quite simple. The Israelites at the time were bordered by various other peoples, who each had their respective tribal deity, like Baal, the storm god. In that context, the first and second commandments of the Hebrew Scriptures, the 10, they talk about how loyalty needs to be not toward those so-called foreign gods, but to the God of Israel. *This* is why it says that God is jealous. God demanded their fidelity in the midst of idolatrous temptations.

More often, however, the Bible presents *another* side of God, one whose compassion, as Psalm 145 says, extends to all creation, a God who will and does understand our suffering, our frailty, and our grief. Consider Psalm 103, which we read at my mother's funeral: "As a father has compassion for his children, so the Lord has compassion for those who fear him," (I prefer the translation "for those who stand in awe of him.") "for he knows how we were made. He remembers that we are dust."

This is the only writing of its kind I've identified in the Hebrew Bible, where God extends compassion to us, *because of our mortality*. Because we are frail, because life is fragile, fleeting, impermanent and ultimately, dust. I think about the molecules that glue together my own body, and I see it as almost kind of "brief marriage," for a short

time, reminding myself as I think of this, how I too am mortal, and will come to an end. God remembers that we are dust.

The incarnation of God in Christ confirms that through his birth, life and death, God not only understands our plight, our suffering, our mortality; God *identifies* with it! God in Christ as it were experiences first hand the anxiety we have over death, as evidenced in Luke 22, where Jesus, anticipating his crucifixion, “sweat” and this sweat became Luke says, “like great drops of blood falling on the ground.” God in Christ understands our anxiety over the death. Jesus sweat like drops of blood in the garden before his own.

God in Christ also experiences what it’s like to mourn, as evident in the story of Lazarus, according to John 11, where, upon learning that the one he loved, Lazarus, had died, Jesus did what? Wept. God understands.

Yet in Revelation 7 our first reading, as well as Matthew 5, our Gospel reading for today, God does more than understand our pain. God *promises to do something about it*. Take a look if you will, at our first reading Revelation, 7:14b, that is, the second half of that verse. In verse 14b the author writes, “Then he that is the angel of the Lord said to me, ‘These are they who have come out of the great ordeal.’”

Now, “out of *what*” is this author referring, in context? Well, as most scholars will tell you, the book of Revelation was written in two parts. Part of it was written during the time of Nero, who is famous for persecuting Christians. The other part of it was written at the end of the first century under the domain of Domitian, who is also, like Nero, famous for persecuting Christians. What’s fascinating to me, is that shortly after Domitian’s reign ended, the suffering of Christians ceased, at least relatively for a while, thanks be to God.

So God notices, or affirms, or observes how these people came out of the great ordeal, out of persecution under two emperors who were opposed to the emerging faith, but notice what comes next: God promises to *do* something about their plight, to do something about their suffering. Take a look at verses 15–17: God promises to shelter them. “They will hunger no more, and thirst no more. The sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe every tear from their eyes.”

We see the same thing in Matthew 5, our Gospel reading for today. Presumably this is why Jesus promises that “the poor in spirit will be blessed.” Now “blessing” has a couple of meanings here. It could mean “Happy are they” –I prefer “Satisfied are they” ... So, Jesus promises that somehow the poor in spirit would be blessed. “The poor in spirit” would mean those in despair, the source of which I’ll explain in a moment.

This is also why those who mourn will be comforted. The question for me is: How? How, in the midst of persecution and loss, will the Jewish Christians to whom

Matthew is speaking, a people who had, with the destruction of their temple in the year 70, lost their place in this world? *How will they be comforted?* It's not just whether God understands, but how will they be comforted?

And here's the relevance for each person in this room. How moreover, might you and I glimpse or experienced the comfort Jesus promises, as we remember today, those whom we have lost? How will you and I be comforted on a day as we acknowledge and remember those we have lost; our mothers or fathers, our grandparents, a sibling, a spouse, a son or daughter, an aunt or uncle, a close friend or associate. By extension, how might we be comforted at the end of a chapter of life – at the loss, for example, of work that gave us meaning, or as we lose our abilities with the process of aging?

I think the Bible in conjunction with common experience offers four ways we can be comforted in the face of grief and loss. Let's look at them briefly: Number One: Using the words of C.S. Lewis, we can be "surprised by joy." "That's one way we can be comforted. Do you ever have the moment where a wave of light suddenly and unexpectedly breaks into the darkness of your grief? Perhaps it's in the midst of family or friends, or in the context of Christian fellowship, that you find yourself momentarily forgetting the pain and bereavement you are experiencing... If you say yes, you know what it's like, however briefly, to be surprised in the context of grief, by joy.

The Psalmist gives perfect expression of what it means to be "surprised by joy." Chapter 30 Verse 5: "Weeping may linger in the night, but joy comes in the morning." (Doesn't for me, not a morning person.) But "joy comes with the morning" – and sometimes that's true. Sometimes, I don't know about you, but I've had the experience of going to bed with all kinds of worries and fears, only to wake up the next day and feel as though I've been renewed or revived. I am in those moments "surprised by joy." That's the first way we can be comforted.

The second in relation to the first is this: "This, too shall pass." You know that phrase. It's one that doesn't appear verbatim in the Bible; nevertheless, several passages come close. In 2 Corinthians 4:17 for example, Paul writes, "For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure." Notice those words, "slight momentary affliction." Paul recognizes that the pain that comes from punishment for his faith, the persecution he's experienced, the hardship, the calamities, the hunger, the fear: this, too shall pass. And it makes even more sense when we know it comes from who experienced the debilitation throughout his entire adult ministry. We know from his letters that he had trouble seeing. We also know according to the same text 2 Corinthians, that he has "a thorn in his flesh," which many scholars believe to be a reference to either malaria or epilepsy.

So here was a man in some cases crippled by pain and hardship, able to recognize at the same time, "this too shall pass."

We see a similar sentiment, surprisingly, in Ecclesiastes 1:2, where the author writes "Vanity of vanities, says the teacher, Vanity of vanities; all is vanity."

Well, vanity is probably better translated “meaningless.” “Meaningless, meaningless, everything is meaningless,” the author says. Why does he say that? Well, in the Hebrew the word is *hevl*, which means puff of wind or smoke. Everything accordingly is meaningless, insofar as nothing lasts. I am dust, you are dust, we are all dust. So “everything is meaningless” is a recognition that as time goes on, this too, whatever we’re experiencing in the moment, will pass. All things change; change, it would seem, is the only constant in life.

But perhaps the best way to understand the sentiment of this too shall pass is to translate it in terms of hope. Here’s a quotation I shared with you several months ago from a book on understanding your grief. The author writes, “Hope is the feeling you have that the feeling you have isn’t permanent.” Love that.

“Hope is the feeling you have that the feeling you have isn’t permanent.”

“This too shall pass.”

Hope is the assurance that God will have the last word and that word is LIFE. More concretely, those of you who have experienced depression, something with which I struggle, know that it often comes to us like a storm. What do you do in the midst of the storm? You get out of its way, and you wait for it to pass. I have learned to watch my depression, and recognize, even in the middle of the storm, that the storm will not continue forever. *This too, shall pass.*

Number three, we can be comforted through the consolation we receive from our siblings in Christ. According to Mark Allen Powell, a Lutheran Scripture scholar, the Beatitudes, which we read in our Gospel reading for today, can be fundamentally reduced to two verses of a hymn regarding what it means to live together in Christian fellowship. Now if you take a look at your bulletin, you’ll notice that the formatting changes beginning with verse three. That’s because, according to Powell, this is a hymn that Jesus adopted for his preaching. A hymn that Jesus adopted, or indeed produced, for his preaching. Powell argues that these eight verses of the Beatitudes can actually be reduced to two: The first four verses acknowledge people who are afflicted:

Blessed are those who mourn.

Blessed are those who hunger for righteousness or justice.

Blessed are the poor in spirit – whose life is in shambles after, in the case of Matthew, the central place of worship for Jews, the temple, had been destroyed by the Romans.

Blessed are these people; satisfied these people will be.

The *second* four verses refer not to those who are afflicted, but to people who are *called to comfort* the afflicted. *You and me*, manifesting the kingdom of God in the process. Now, how does this happen at Queen Anne Lutheran Church? One of the things that I notice and love to see is when somebody in bereavement has another person who has volunteered to cook and serve them meals. That’s how we comfort the afflicted. A card

in the mail, a phone call, a short visit. These are all ways that we can comfort those who are “poor in spirit”, or those who mourn.

I think here about why we attend church. You know, our broader culture says, “I don’t go to church. I don’t get anything out of it.” Well, maybe the reason you’re here is not for you, but for someone else! Somebody you might comfort, somebody as Jean did when I walked through those doors. “You got this.” That’s comforting the anxious! But more broadly, it can be comforting the afflicted. You are not only here for yourself, perhaps today or next Sunday you will be called to comfort someone in need.

Before our first service, a gentleman who had lost his ability to walk was leaning against the chapel door. When I came in, Dolly Smith was standing by him; some of you know Dolly, she is a nurse. She was comforting the afflicted. We were able to get him help, an ambulance, and hopefully clothing and food. That’s what we’re called to do. So the third way we can be comforted is through the consolation we receive from our siblings in Christ.

We’ve now seen three ways we can be comforted according to Scripture as well as common human experience.

We can be, in the midst of family or fellowship, “surprised by joy.”

We can be comforted knowing that “this too shall pass.”

We can receive consolation from others in the body of Christ.

One of my favorite verses here comes from Paul. It’s in Galatians 6, where he says, “the only law is the law of love.” And love invites us to bear one another’s burdens.

And the fourth and final way, I would argue, that we can be comforted, is the most significant, and I want you each to hear this very closely. In life there are some losses so big that *nothing* will bring comfort except for Reunion. Let me repeat that: In life, there are some losses so big that nothing will produce comfort except for Reunion.

When I was an intern pastor many years ago in the cold, rural lands of Minnesota, I remember a young man who came to me, whose brother had been killed in a motorcycle accident three years prior. He explained his grief like this: “For me, his death was first here, right in front of me. He says, “Now it’s here.” (*gesturing a bit off to the side.*) But for my parents, their grief will always be here. (*gestures right in front.*)”

For them, the loss of their son was so great that nothing could bring comfort to them except for the promise of Reunion. Something we anticipate every week when we celebrate the Eucharist, as a foretaste of the feast to come.

When the English poet Alfred Tennyson lost his closest friend, he turned to Scripture and its promise of a future age or celebration in the life of the world to come. “And I shall know him when we meet,” Tennyson writes, “and we shall sit at endless feast, enjoying each other’s good.” This is the greatest consolation Scripture provides: We will meet again. God will wipe away every tear from our eyes. Death, continuing with

the book of Revelation, will be no more. Mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.

Now of these four forms of consolation, for me personally, the one I struggle with is believing the last; that we will experience reunion with those we've loved and lost in the coming age of the Messiah. And yet, as I told my mom shortly before she died, "Mom, if love is stronger than death, then I will see you again." That is my hope; that Love actually wins, and that I will see my mother once more.

I no longer even think much about my own death. The only thing I want is reunion with Mom; and I suspect that is perhaps the same for many of you. The only thing you want is reunion with your mother or father, your deceased husband or wife, or son or daughter who died untimely.

It's true. Sometimes a story can change everything. If your grief displaces God, such that you can only think of the loved one you had who had died, let four-year-old Jessica remind you that God will understand. That God is big enough for your grief. That God isn't ultimately jealous, but compassionate, loving, gracious and merciful. May each of us who grieve this All Saints Day be comforted, in whatever form of consolation I listed; whatever speaks to us the most.

And all God's people said, "Amen."