

God's Resounding Answer to Grief

Revelation 21:1-6

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As we begin this morning, I'd like to ask the children to count how many times they hear me use the words, "sad, sadness, cry, crying," and "tears." At a recent gathering of pastors, the conversation and share time took an unusual turn. We started talking about being sad when our pets died. Have you ever lost a favorite pet? A dog, cat, gold fish, parakeet or hamster? What did you feel? Even now, you can probably feel the profound sense of loss--sadness that is real. We need to remember that all tears are important to God.

Gail Sheehy wrote the definitive work on grief (*Passages*). She spent nearly two years after 9/11 in a New Jersey community which lost 50 people on that day. Grief, said Sheehy, is spiral, not linear and she was forced to throw out her time-honored stages of grief. She went on to say that the most useless word in grief discussion is "closure," because there is none. So during this Eastertide season, the lectionary invites us to ponder God's resounding answer to grief and tears.

Even if you've hung out very little in church, you know that one of the themes in the Book of Revelation is God's awesomeness. But note how in vv. 3-4, God's awesomeness turns to tenderness. Read v. 4: No more death, no more mourning (sadness, grief), no more crying (a different Greek word, one meaning loud wailing, deep lament, loud utterances of despair) and no more pain.

Scientists know a lot more than they used to about tears. They note that emotional tears are chemically different from the ones we shed when we chop onions. Emotional tears contain more protein, making them more viscous, so that they stick to our skin more strongly, running down our cheeks more slowly, so that we see them--and so do others. Maybe God's way of showing us our vulnerability? The other day my little grandson fell off the foot stool and he cried great big tears. His grandma picked him up and wiped away the tears. So God does with us.

The movie "Inside Out" is one of the best animated films to come out recently. Riley is a little girl who lives in the Midwest, but her family moves to the west coast. A new city, new school, new friends, new house. And Riley works to keep her emotions balanced: Fear, joy, anger, sadness. If she's not careful, sadness will win out.

You may be asking, "How can this be?" How can we have hope in the face of death and separation? The answer is Jesus Christ. Observe how Jesus' life, death and resurrection change everything. Separation from God becomes God tabernacling among us (v. 3); sadness becomes joy; death becomes endless life; pain becomes total healing; and misguided desires become

fulfillment and satisfaction, like water to thirst souls (v. 6). In v. 6, Jesus is named the Alpha and Omega (first and last letters in the Greek alphabet, as in our A to Z). The rabbis used to say Adam broke the law, alpha through omega; Abraham kept it, alpha through omega. And now John adds, Jesus Christ fulfilled it, A to Z!

Some friends and I recently got a chance to take the Capitol tour--I mean the one all the way to the top of the dome. We stood up there and looked out over the city. Wow. Does it look different! And you can see so far! That's what the Book of Revelation does. It takes us up high. We can glimpse eternity. And from God's vantage point, we can see what matters and what doesn't.

When Revelation was written, the followers of Jesus were being mistreated by a playground bully, the Roman Empire. Have you ever been bullied by someone? There are two dangers when we're bullied. One is that we get hurt. The other is that we become like the bully. God tells us in Revelation, "No. I'll take care of it. I'll fix it and make it right. Trust me." We see that from way up high.

We all have those moments when we need to be reminded of what matters--a funeral, a pet dies, a health scare. These things clarify and focus priorities. And we can know that the deepest thirsts and longings of the soul are not about money or power or being popular. They are about eternal connections which cannot be broken. About peace with God and others, when God wipes away all tears.