

Jesus Wept

John 11:32-44

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As a sermon text, John 11:35 is a preacher's dream: "Jesus wept." By this statement, I do not refer to its familiarity in our culture, although that is an asset rather than a liability. In a Bible saturated culture, a preacher might forage about for the novel or unfamiliar to grab the listener's attention. But ours is not such a culture, and the preacher searches for a familiar fragment to evoke recognition in an auditor feeling increasingly a stranger to religious speech. Upon hearing "Jesus wept," this listener feels somewhat at home, the mind blessing itself with this residue of recollection, and the ego rescued from the avalanche of unknown tongues. Nor do I speak so favorably of this text because of its brevity even though that, too, is a plus. However afflicted by disarray a sermon may be, if it contains at its center a phrase or a sentence, preferably scriptural, which can lodge in the congregation's memory, then the heart of the message may continue to beat long after the body of it lies in the morgue of forgetfulness. And I must confess that it is not the Christology of this text which prompts my calling it a preacher's dream. This is not to dismiss its christological significance; of course not. "Jesus wept" is as strong a commentary on "And the Word became flesh" as can be found.

However, what I have in mind about this "dream text" is its portability, the ease with which it can be moved from circumstance to circumstance, from congregation to congregation, without loss of appropriateness. Many biblical texts can be extracted from their historical, theological, and literary contexts only at great risks of loss or distortion of meaning, and the relocation of such texts among one's listeners is no less fraught with dangers. But "Jesus wept" has the mobility of a proverb which does not depend on a particular context but which is self-contained, carrying its truth as a seed carries its life in its bosom. The preacher lifts it easily from its place in Scripture, hears no protest, and just as easily sets it down among the listeners. Is there any place where this text does not fit? Spray paint it on the gray walls of the inner city: "Jesus wept." Scrawl it with a crayon on the hallway of an orphanage: "Jesus wept." Embroider it on every pillow in the nursing home: "Jesus wept." Nail it on posts along a refugee road leading out of East Timor: "Jesus wept." Flash it in blinking neon at the bus station where the homeless are draped over pitiless benches: "Jesus wept." Carve it over the door of a mountain cabin at which a fifteen year old girl stands with a crying child: "Jesus wept." Sky write it over every greed raped landscape: "Jesus wept." There seems no place where this text does not fit.

None, that is, except the one where it is found: John 11. In the middle of the sign story of the raising of Lazarus appear the two words, Jesus wept. Were one content with a casual summary of the story, then it would be enough to say that Jesus wept at the death of a friend and much comfort would flow from the thought. But the text is too full of clues that resist such a reading, clues which, in fact, make the words "Jesus wept" seem unnatural and out of place. For example, upon hearing of Lazarus' illness, Jesus says that "the Son of God may be glorified through it" (v. 4). Since the

“glorifying” of the Son is John’s way of speaking of Jesus’ death and return to God, then he is saying that the Lazarus story will lead to Jesus’ death. And so it did. The raising of Lazarus created such an uproar in Jerusalem that the city’s leaders were disturbed, “so from that day on they planned to put him (Jesus) to death” (v.53). Or again, notice that Jesus, when notified by Martha and Mary that his friend was ill, did not go rushing to him, as any friend surely would do. Rather, Jesus “stayed two days longer in the place where he was” (v.6). Does a friend delay his travel, arrive four days after death occurs, and then weep at the grave? More is afoot here than a funeral, tears of grief, and a raising of the dead. This story, as beautiful and helpful as it is, in John’s language is a sign, an event pointing beyond itself to a greater truth.

When Jesus arrived in Bethany and talked with the sisters of Lazarus, “he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved” (v.33). Was it because of the unbelief of the mourners? Perhaps, but throughout this Gospel Jesus had faced unbelief with clear eye and level gaze. Is it because Martha and Mary do not understand that he is the resurrection and the life, that he, not the grave, marks the beginning of life eternal? Perhaps, but in this Gospel he is not understood by anyone, not his mother, not his brothers, not his disciples, not the religious leaders, not the crowds. We do not expect otherwise here.

Look more closely at the text. Jesus asked, “Where have you laid him?” The sisters said, “Lord, come and see” (v.34). At this point Jesus weeps, immediately after the invitation is extended, “Come and see.” In this Gospel the expression “Come and see” is the call to discipleship, the invitation to faith. When the first would-be disciples asked Jesus, “Where do you abide?” He said, “Come and see” (1:38-39). When a hesitant Nathaniel said to Philip, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Philip replied, “Come and see” (1:46). The woman of Samaria, excited by her encounter with Jesus, ran into Sychar and invited the townspeople, “Come and see” (4:29). And now, the very call to trust extended to others is extended to Jesus: “Come and see.” Jesus wept. Jesus is invited to identify with us all, struggling to live in faithful obedience under conditions of suffering and death. He is called to seek no exemption from disappointment, shame, betrayal, and misunderstanding. Shall there be a thorny road for the flock but a primrose path for the shepherd? Shall the scouts sleep on the cold ground in the darkness of the woods while the scoutmaster relaxes in a nearby motel? If so, how can we pray in his name? How can we sing “What a Friend We Have in Jesus”? Are we to thrash about in the angry waves alone knowing he stands safe and dry on shore? How can we possibly walk out to the edge alone, all alone to feel the mist in our face and the fog in our throat if he was not perfected in suffering, tasting death for everyone? “Lord, come and see. Jesus wept.”

Yes, Jesus was greatly disturbed and wept, for the invitation to come under the same conditions as his followers reminded him of what he knew when he first received word of Lazarus’ illness: this sickness is not unto death; the Son of God will go to the cross and to God because of it. Briefly put, for him to call Lazarus out of the tomb is for him to enter it. Briefly put, our text is John’s account of Jesus’ Gethsemane. Unlike the other Gospels, John records no agony in the garden, no scream on the cross. But here, with grieving friends at a tomb in Bethany, is the crisis. As he was to say shortly after, “Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say – ‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour” (12:27). The path before him is now clear: the rule of nature demands the death of the seed in order to have life;

the rule of discipleship demands the giving of life in order to have life. If he is for us and our salvation, the Son of God cannot bypass the tomb and return to God. "Where have you laid him?" is not, then, a request for directions to the tomb, and "Come and see" is not an offer of directions. The sisters think so, but they say far more than they realize. But Jesus knows that the whole drama of redemption lies in that brief exchange. He is invited to his own tomb, and he weeps.

Does this bother you? Would you prefer that our text simply tell the story of a friend of Jesus becoming ill, but in order to work a miracle and shock a community into faith, Jesus delays his arrival until his friend is not only dead but decaying, making the miracle even more persuasive? Would you prefer that the meaning of the text be exhausted by grieving sisters being consoled by words about resurrection and life and then joined in sorrow by a weeping Jesus, who immediately raises their brother, a comfort to them and a wonder to unbelieving mourners? Were that the whole of it, faith could, no doubt, be nourished by it and those who so read it, bless many aching hearts at gravesides everywhere. But if the story, on one level about Lazarus, is on a deeper level about Christ, then is not its blessing far greater, touching not one family in Bethany, but the whole human family? If the story is really about Christ, then the blessing to us all is life eternal. And if the story is really about Christ, then it is not about a death following illness being overcome by a raising, but about a meaningful death, deliberately entered into for the sake of the world, and a resurrection for the life of the world. The death of Lazarus was a tragic event in the absence of Christ; the death of Christ was an extraordinary gift in the presence of God whose will he obeyed. As a Lazarus story our text is an Easter story; as a Christ story our text is a Good Friday and Easter story.

The difference must not be lost on us. Offering Easter to the world without Good Friday is to encourage its easy translation into a rite of spring, full of flowers, eggs, and rabbits. Offering to the world both Good Friday and Easter is to invite entrance, not only into his death and life, but into our own as well. The shout at the tomb reserves its real meaning for those who are with him as he weeps.