

Today You Will Be with Me

Luke 23:33-43 by Patty Friesen Memorial Sunday Nov. 20/22

In this last Sunday before Advent, we end the church year with remembering our loved ones who have died, with the ritual of lighting candles and saying their names aloud. It is a ritual through which we go through the motions to help our emotions. Rituals around death are especially important to us as Christians.

The gospel reading reminds us of Jesus' own death. Every element of the story serves to declare Jesus' identity as the Messiah and the significance of his death for the salvation of the world. The passion narratives make the point that the death of Jesus is important not because of how much he suffered but because of who he was and how his death was connected to both his life and the redemptive acts of God throughout the history of Israel. With bitter irony, the Lukan Jesus is one who brings good news to the poor, but at his death the people watch, the soldiers mock, and one of the criminals beside him blasphemes. God's vindication of Jesus through the resurrection will mean God's validation of Jesus' life. In the interim, however, Jesus is "numbered with the transgressors" and has died.

At least a quarter of a million people queued up to see Queen Elizabeth's coffin lying in state in Westminster Hall on September 19. The first person in the line—which stretched for five miles—waited for 50 hours just to pass through the hall and briefly pay her respects to a monarch she never met.

We often criticize people for just going through the motions, but in this case, many went to great lengths for the opportunity to do so. Some mourned the queen as a person, expressing admiration for her lifetime commitment to an office greater than herself. Some mourned the tandem decline of the monarchy and of Britain as a global empire. Some mourned the horrors

that the empire wrought on their own families and cultures around the world. Some mourned their own private griefs. Some simply wanted to be a part of history.

The atmosphere in the queue was jovial, even celebratory. But when people entered the hall, the mood became “very still and very quiet,” 15-year-old Angelica Read told the Washington Post. With “the candles and lights and guards . . . it was completely timeless and special.” Those who waited for days to enter that timeless space created by ritual may have benefited significantly from their participation.

Rituals require us to go through the motions. Rituals performed after loss lessen the intensity of grief. And the rituals we perform with others bring us into alignment with our communities. Going through the motions together creates social harmony and a measure of collective healing. To say that the queen’s funeral brought England together is more than a cliché.

We have endured enormous loss during the pandemic with almost no public acknowledgment of national grief. More than a million people have died from COVID. Declaring the pandemic over does not put an end date on the cumulative stress and grief we have experienced since 2020. What would it mean for us to acknowledge such unfathomable loss with a public ritual of mourning? Not the hair-tearing and teeth-gnashing of biblical lament nor the righteous rage of protest, but a well-ordered performance of communal grief?

Research shows what happens when we don’t perform rituals for our grief: we experience lostness and disorientation. But when we participate in a ritual of mourning, we begin to close the loop. Our bodies signal to our brains that we’ve reached another stage. Moving with the queue through a quiet hall lit with candles, we make a path forward, together. Then maybe we

can step into another stage of grief and find freedom for our souls. Rituals like Memorial Sunday and funerals help us do that.

Funerals are the important theological statements we make about the love of God, the companionship of Jesus, the comfort of the Holy Spirit and the support of the faith community. Funeral sermons need to be the best sermons we hear all year long. They are the most important opportunities we have pastorally, to preach hope and comfort and making sense of death. We've all heard enough bad funeral sermons, and have heard some here unfortunately; wasted opportunities for families and communities to find meaning. At funerals, it's up to family to tell the story of their loved one's life with laughter and tears. It's my job as the minister to remind us of God's character and presence with us in loss and to name it as a loss, a hole – not to make death lighter and brighter that the loved one is in a better place with pie in the sky in the sweet bye and bye.

In his grief memoir *Confessions of a Funeral Director*, Caleb Wilde talks about a new vision of God with us in death and grief. Even though he was a third-generation funeral director, Caleb collapsed one day from spiritual exhaustion.

“It wasn't my closeness with death that was destroying me, it was how I viewed it. I saw death as a certain kind of darkness that needed religion and some degree of flat-out denial to make it ever so slightly lighter and brighter. We paint God as having no need, a God who is immortal, not mortal like us, and who can stand alone unhurt and untouched by relationships. In a word, God has no vulnerability. Wouldn't it be interesting if instead of a perfect detached God, we talked about a God who was vulnerable? What if we talked about a God who stands, maybe even kneels, with us in our sadness? If God is really love, if God sees us and feels with us; it means that at God's core is this vulnerability that allows God to feel our pains, to know our

sorrows and our joys. (P. 79, 93-94 Confessions). Jesus provides a vulnerable grieving portrait of God and the gospel stories of Jesus with Lazarus and Jesus with the children and Jesus on the cross provide a true picture of a God who knows and comforts us in our sufferings and sorrow, not a God who is above and separate from our difficulties.

When I last saw funeral director Katrina Funk, she said, “I send out condolences and readings about the grief journey at the 3, 6- and 12-month anniversaries of the deaths of our clients 'loved ones. We don't allow enough sad. We think we always have to be strong and somehow by-pass the grief work. I wish instead of rushing to Humboldt Strong after that horrific accident, we could have held Humboldt Sad for at least 30 official days of mourning or a year of official mourning as some cultures practice. With the tragedy on James Smith Cree Nation earlier this summer, we saw First Nations build sacred fires and enter sweat lodges to do the hard work of grief and forgiveness after the loss of ten of their members.

Again, Caleb Wiebe in Confessions of a Funeral Director describes how we care for ourselves in the deaths of our loved ones. He encourages death sabbaths, where families take a week after a death to not go to work or school and to focus on loss, tears, pain, needs, tiredness, silence, laughter, love and each other as necessary self-care. We all grieve differently and there is no right or wrong way. What death asks of us is to pause. It doesn't tell us what we need to do when we pause because there may be nothing to do at all but death asks us to be respectful in its presence. To sit with it. Listen to it. To embrace the death moment.

We care for ourselves after the deaths of our loved ones by keeping our loved ones alive in our thoughts through active remembering - being intentional in remembering their death days as we would remember their birthdays and by telling the stories of their death even if they were difficult and sad just as we tell the joyful stories of our loved ones 'births because death and birth

are the most significant moments of the lives of the living. We remember our loved ones favourite foods and favourite activities. We wear their clothes and use their cookware and tools. We talk about them and use their names even though others may be reluctant to do so. They may be reluctant to speak of our loved ones because they think it might make us sad but our loved ones are exactly what we want to talk about.

And so this morning, we name our loved ones and light candles in their memory. For those on-line, please send in your requests and we can light candles for them – Steph will pass them onto us.

May we not be afraid to lean into what death and our loved ones teach us. Let death show us goodness. Let death break us open, not break us apart. Let death make us pause, and reflect, meditate and take inventory of our life. Let death show us what is good about the here and now. Let us embrace the silence that death creates. Let death invite us to be more patient with our family members and ourselves as we learn, grow and overcome. Let us lean into our communities that surround us in death and appreciate our relationships in these times.

Let us pray...Our loving God who creates us, forming us in the womb, holding our entire life and drawing us near again in death. Thank you that we experience who you are as a faithful God most profoundly in the deaths of our loved ones - these difficult and sacred moments. Be near to us to comfort us in these days of remembrance and give us hope. Amen.

We begin with lighting candles for four of our members who have died this year – Anne Friesen, Helen Peters, Alan Guenther and Denita Guenther. We light another candle in honour of Queen Elizabeth. We light another candle in honour of all those who have died from COVID. Please come forward for candle-lighting and if you want to say the name of your loved one aloud – please do so.