

A GOD WHO WEEPS

It's STRANGE! Lent is not even OVER yet, and here we are listening to a RESURRECTION story! Today's Scripture Lesson is an obvious FORESHADOWING of what to COME. It's a PREVIEW of the raising of Jesus HIMSELF! And John places THIS story just before the death and resurrection of Jesus because, for the EARLY Christians, the resurrection of Jesus was SUCH an AMAZING and MIRACULOUS event that they actually had to work themselves UP to it. Now, of course, 2000 years later, WE are not as IMPRESSED. We EXPECT the Son of God to have power over death. He was DIVINE, after all! In fact, I think OUR problem is just the OPPOSITE. I think WE sometimes forget just how HUMAN Jesus was. Oh, we TALK about His HUMANNESSESS, but RARELY do we THINK of Him that way. And THAT'S why people are often SURPRISED by the depth of EMOTION that Jesus shows in today's Scripture Lesson.

The FIRST emotion that we witness is when John tells us that Jesus LOVES Lazarus and his 2 sisters, Mary and Martha. And of course, LOVE is a very DEEP emotion. We don't know MUCH about the love of Jesus for His FAMILY, but we DO know that whenever Jesus went to JERUSALEM, went to the Holy City, He ALWAYS stayed at the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. And how WONDERFUL it must have been for the One who had NOWHERE to lay His head to at LEAST be able to REST His weary FEET, His overburdened MIND, and His OFTEN broken HEART in the home of these VERY special FRIENDS, just 2 miles from Jerusalem! And actually, it must have been VERY important to Him, because NOWHERE in the gospels is it EVER recorded that Jesus went for REST to His OWN home, or anyone ELSE'S. Who knows? Maybe in His OWN home, He wasn't really UNDERSTOOD, or LISTENED to. But instead of RESENTING it, as most of US would, Jesus just FINDS Himself a NEW home and a NEW family. And I would hope that we would ALL do the SAME if we HAD to, because we ALL need a place to put our FEET up; a place nobody LAUGHS at our hopes and dreams; a place where WHAT we say in confidence is understood in confidence and KEPT in confidence; and a place where we are ACCEPTED and APPRECIATED for WHO we are, without QUESTION, or judgment. And it seems that THESE 2 sisters, and their brother, Lazarus, offered Jesus JUST such a SPECIAL kind of RETREAT place. So, He MUST have loved them, for they were not only His FRIENDS, but probably His CONFIDANTES as well.

Well, IF Jesus DID love them so much, then it's no WONDER He shows so much EMOTION when He gets to their HOME and finds them WEEPING and WAILING because LAZARUS has already DIED. Sure He knows that He CAN and WILL raise Lazarus from the DEAD, but THAT'S not the POINT. WHEN He sees Mary weeping at His FEET, the Gospel says that Jesus *was greatly DISTURBED in Spirit and DEEPLY moved*. Now THAT'S a pretty good TRANSLATION from the original GREEK in which the story was written, but it's NOT good ENOUGH. In GREEK, we are told that Jesus was SO distressed in Spirit that His ENTIRE body TREMBLED. The GREEK word for "deeply moved" is the word "*EMBRIMASTHAI*," which is a word that is USUALLY used to describe a horse's SNORTING. In OTHER words, AS Jesus sees His beloved friend, Mary, WEEPING at His FEET, He is SEIZED by SUCH deep AGONY that He involuntarily GROANS!

Now REMEMBER: to any NON-JEW -- and THAT'S who John is WRITING his Gospel TO, the GENTILES, or NON-Jews -- to any NON-Jew, THIS would have been a STAGGERING and INCREDIBLE picture of God. After all, John has written His ENTIRE Gospel on the theme that, IN Jesus, we see the MIND of God. And to the GENTILES at that time, who were GREEK in their thinking and culture, the PRIMARY characteristic of a god, ANY god, was that a god is "*APATHEIA*," which is the ROOT word of APATHETIC. And it SIMPLY means that a god, ANY god, is

INCAPABLE of feeling ANY kind of human emotion whatsoever. SO, if a god CANNOT feel HUMAN emotions, then what a DIFFERENT picture of GOD they get by looking at JESUS in this story! I mean: HERE is a God whose HEART is just FILLED with anguish for the ANGUISH of God's PEOPLE. And ISN'T it TRUE that the GREATEST thing that Jesus ever DID was to bring us the GOOD news that OURS is a God who CARES, and CARES very DEEPLY?

And THEN, just a VERSE later, in what is the SHORTEST verse in the ENTIRE Bible, we're TOLD that Jesus WEPT. Now, to a GREEK reader, THIS would have been the most ASTONISHING verse in the entire STORY. That a GOD could actually WEEP would just be totally BEYOND their comprehension! And I think that many of US have trouble thinking about God that way as well. I mean, it's hard to imagine that God would not totally be in CONTROL, isn't it? It's HARD to imagine that GOD could be brought to TEARS at the sight and sound of HUMAN suffering and pain, isn't it? After all, WE want God to be STRONGER than that, don't we? WE want a God who takes CHARGE of things! DON'T we want to know that EVERYTHING happens for a REASON, even if WE just cannot COMPREHEND that reason! NO! We don't WANT a God who WEEPS!

On the OTHER hand, however, how COMFORTING it IS to think about God being in anguish WITH us whenever life DEALS us some terrible BLOW. Isn't it COMFORTING to think about that possibility? It IS for ME! I know that I will NEVER forget the words of my TEACHER and MENTOR, William Sloane Coffin, in his FIRST sermon at Riverside Church in New York following the death of his son, Alex. Alex was just 24 years old when he DIED in an auto accident in Boston. His car SWIRVED off the road and PLUNGED into Boston Harbor. And when Bill was FINALLY able to stand up again in his PULPIT at Riverside Church, THESE were some of the WORDS that he spoke. He said: *The ONE thing that should NEVER be SAID when someone dies is, 'it is the will of GOD.'* NEVER do WE know enough to say THAT! In fact, he continued, *my OWN consolation lies in KNOWING that it was NOT the will of God that Alex DIE, and that WHEN the waves CLOSED over his sinking car, GOD'S heart was first of ALL our hearts to BREAK.* Yes, a GOD who can WEEP with us can COMFORT us immensely.

Early in my ministry, I used to have a good friend named Michael Manson, who was a Jewish RABBI. He was ALSO a survivor of a Nazi DEATH camp during the HOLOCAUST. And one day I ASKED him: *Michael, I just can't IMAGINE what it must have been LIKE to live in one of those Nazi DEATH camps. I mean: HOW did you SURVIVE it? HOW did you keep your SANITY through it all?* And he THOUGHT for a moment, probably wondering IF he wanted to SHARE this with me. And then he LOOKED me in the EYES, with TEARS in his OWN, and said: *Gordon, WHENEVER I looked at those GAS chambers, or the INCINERATORS with the smoke of burning flesh billowing OUT of them, I could see GOD. That's right! I could see God KNEELING right there BESIDE them, KNEELING and WEEPING. And THAT image of God gave me STRENGTH and HOPE.* Yes, friends: a God who weeps WITH us when we suffer offers us INCREDIBLE strength and courage.

After all: JUST because God WEEPS does NOT mean that God is rendered HELPLESS. Jesus in this story about Lazarus KNEW that He was going to RAISE Lazarus from the dead! Jesus KNEW that HE had the power to create a RESURRECTION here! Jesus KNEW that He would soon go to WORK and bring NEW life to his friend! But STILL, He WEPT! STILL, He felt the AGONY of GRIEF! And STILL, He looked with COMPASSION upon His friends, MARY and Martha, and STOOD in solidarity WITH them as they ANGUISHED over their brother. Yes, Jesus WEPT with them! And I don't know about YOU, but I find THAT picture of Jesus to be ONE of the most PRECIOUS and EMPOWERING pictures of God that Jesus GIVES to us, because for ME, ONLY a God who WEEPS at our INHUMANITY, and at our DESTRUCTIVENESS, and at our SELF-CENTEREDNESS, and at ALL of the pain and suffering that humankind INFLICTS and ENDURES in this life; ONLY a God who WEEPS at all that human suffering can be TRUSTED. It's like I would

NEVER trust a SOLDIER who ENJOYS fighting. To ME, a God who doesn't WEEP is a God who doesn't CARE! And I would NEVER trust and LOVE and WORSHIP a God who doesn't CARE! SO, this picture that we have in our Scripture Lesson today, this picture of Jesus WEEPING at the tomb of his friend is ESSENTIAL for MY faith, because it SHOWS me that God is a God who CARES very DEEPLY about US! And I couldn't worship and adore ANY other kind of God.

And the OTHER aspect of this story that I find COMFORTING and EMPOWERING is the fact that Mary and Martha KNOW that ALL they have to DO is send WORD to Jesus, and He will COME and HELP. I mean: THINK about what that SAYS about the power of PRAYER, and about God's RESPONSIVENESS to our prayers. Now, God is NO cosmic SANTA Claus! We don't see Jesus just turn around and come running back to Bethany in THEIR time-frame, or do EXACTLY what they WISH Him to do, which is to KEEP Lazarus alive. But, Jesus DOES come to them. And He DOES transform DEATH into NEW life. But He ONLY does so AFTER He shares THEIR anguish and pain. He ONLY does so AFTER He WEEPS with them. Yes friends: OURS is a God who weeps WITH us! And I HOPE that KNOWING that truth can help YOU as MUCH as it helps ME.

Yes, we have a BEAUTIFUL picture of God in our Scripture Lesson today! And it's a PICTURE we can hold ONTO -- and CHERISH -- and put our FAITH in! It's a picture of a GOD who WEEPS! And what an EMPOWERING picture it IS! Thanks be to God! AMEN.