



making God's love visible in downtown Memphis

Jesus Wept

All Saints' Sunday, Year B, John 11:32-44

November 3, 2024

The Rev. Paul McLain

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

Embedded in our Gospel passage is the shortest verse in all the Bible: 'Jesus wept.' Well, that's how I remember it as a child from the King James Version. The New Revised Standard Version that we use translates it, 'Jesus began to weep.' This begs the question, why would an Episcopalian ever use two words when four will do?

Long ago, churches filled their baptismal fonts with what's known as 'mother's water.' Mother's water is a heavy magnesium-laden salt water. The reason for this was more practical than theological. That was a time in which children were fully immersed in the baptismal font. It was thought that this salt-water would insure the health of the child. But I wonder if there might be a theological reason for putting salt-water in the baptismal font. Salt and water are the make-up of tears. What would it mean to think of the cleansing, renewing, and life-giving water of baptism as the tears shed by Jesus?

When Jesus arrives on the scene of the death of his friend Lazarus and sees the tears of the dead man's sister Mary, he is overcome with grief and begins to weep also. Today is All Saints' Day, the day in which we especially acknowledge our communion with the saints, the mystical intercommunion of the living and the dead. Two of the saints with whom we commune and look upon as examples are Mary and Martha of Bethany.

When my wife Ruthie and I led a Vacation Bible School in Jamaica, we told the children the story of how Mary sat at Jesus' feet and listened to his teaching, while Martha was working in the kitchen, preparing their meal. Martha complained to Jesus that she had to do all the practical tasks by herself since Mary was not helping her. We asked each child to draw this scene. It was perhaps not surprising how they all drew Martha in the form of their own mothers, complete with all the yelling and finger-wagging.

Jesus reminded Martha that what Mary was doing in listening to him was most important. From this story, we often make Martha a symbol for the active life and Mary a symbol for the contemplative life. And Jesus affirms both as valid. But we too often miss the depth of faith present in Martha. Just before the passage we read today, Martha meets Jesus and gives one of the boldest confessions of faith found in the Gospels. She says, 'Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.'

But it is not hearing the words of Martha, it is seeing the tears of Mary that moves Jesus to tears. Mary freely and fully expresses the range of her emotions. In the next chapter, it is Mary who lavishly anoints the feet of Jesus with a fragrant perfume at a banquet, and then lovingly wipes his feet with her hair. While Martha expresses her grief for her brother and her devotion to Jesus in vital ways with a bold confession and with faithful, active service, Mary pours out her love for Lazarus and Jesus with a cascade of tears and a lavish act of foot-washing.

Both Martha and Mary *truly see* Jesus. It's striking how *truly seeing* is a porthole into the presence of divinity. One wonders if it is no accident that our Creator attached the ducts from which our tears flow to the organ of sight-the eyes-our windows into the divine.

Ironically, one of Jesus' most human acts takes place in the center of the gospel of John, which most reveals his divinity. And we are prompted to ask, 'If Jesus is God, and Jesus is moved to tears, does this mean God suffers?' For years, I have struggled with the notion derived from the thought of Aristotle that God is the unmoved first mover. This idea has been extended to a belief that God is perfect in such a way that precludes feelings or emotions.

I have slowly come to see God differently. Through exploring the thought of theologians and mystics, and mainly through wrestling with this question in seeing suffering up close and through prayer, I have come to see what is called 'the pathos of God' –
the God who feels,
the God who suffers,
the God who even sheds tears.

One writer summarizes the pathos of God this way: 'There was a cross in the heart of God long before there was one planted on the green hill outside Jerusalem. And now that the cross of wood has been taken down, the one in the heart of God abides, and it will remain so long as there is one human soul for whom to suffer.'

The belief that God suffers for us, that God cares, that God weeps over us, affects the way we live. We live more like Mary and Martha. We are moved to confess Christ as our hope, and we are also moved to shed tears alongside him. Our tears join the tears of Jesus shed alongside fellow children of God whose lives have been destroyed or turned upside down by recent hurricanes. Our tears join the tears of Jesus shed alongside mothers whose children's lives have been cut short by the hand of violence here in our city and region. Our tears join with the tears of Jesus shed alongside any one of us who hurts or grieves.

But through the resurrection of Jesus and his action in raising his friend Lazarus from the dead, the tears in which we are baptized also become tears of joy and tears of hope. Jesus demonstrated that God, not death, has the final word. The eternal life that Jesus promises and makes available is not just reserved for a distant future. It begins in the glorious present that he inaugurates. And, as Martha and Mary teach us, his baptismal font of tears stirs up new currents in our lives. These tears flow out of us in new directions of faithful service and lavish love.

Jesus' tears and our tears are not just signs of his and our humanity. They are signs of his and our divinity.

Jesus wept.

And as we see the world more and more through God's eyes,
so do we.

Amen.