

## *Rites and Rituals*

### *John 11: 1-44 Jesus Weeps*

And Jesus wept. And the onlookers said, see how much he loved him. Except the ones who had been following Jesus. Some of them said, “If he could open the eyes of a blind man couldn’t he have just kept this man from dying?” Then imagine, no death, no grief, no weeping. If he is as powerful as they say couldn’t he just avoid the pain of losing someone he loved?

And yet one of the reasons we follow Jesus is because he was human and he was not a human who took shortcuts. He was not a human who was stoically serious in the face of all things and unmoved by either his own grief or the grief of others.

Lent is a 40 day journey from Ash Wednesday until Good Friday. It doesn’t include Sundays, officially so we can remember on Sundays that there will be a resurrection at the end of the journey. It is one of our rituals as a Christian tradition: to set aside a time of year to prepare ourselves. We do this before Christmas as well. We take time to intentionally put down things we have been meaning to put down and to pick up things we’ve been meaning to pick up. And yet Lent seems so much harder than Advent.

Firstly, Advent, of course, comes with, well at least in Canada, joy and gladness all around us. The western consumer culture uses Advent as its high selling time, and so even if we are supposed to be seriously preparing ourselves, we can go to a mall and just avoid all the serious pondering we are supposed to be doing. But Lent, I mean occasionally they put the Easter chocolates out early, but otherwise they don’t really notice at all. It’s just this odd time when Christians act weird. Some of them don’t drink during Lent, some of them don’t eat chocolate. (I’ve never taken on that particular tradition myself.) Other people add things to their routines in Lent. I know people who choose to write a letter each day (by hand, like with a pen and a paper!) to someone they love. What is it that draws us to these routines that become, for us; rituals?

Well I am going to take you back to first-year university for a moment. I was in an Anthropology class and someone said, as we were learning the evolution of the human body, well okay then, we know how one day the skeleton stood up and walked around and one day they began using tools, but really at what point did we go from being mammals to being humans? And there are many things that we want to point at. Then we look to the animals and realize, orangutans use

tools, dolphins have language. Oh, what is it then? To be human means to know and to seek out meaning and safety. To know that one is vulnerable. To know that someday, one will die. One anthropologist believes that the day we became human was the first day on our long nomadic journey around the globe we stopped, because one member of our community died. One day we realized that that made a difference to who we were as a community and so we took a moment and we dug a grave, or perhaps built a fire. We did something to mark the ending and then we began to journey on. And that was the first ritual.

This happened all around the globe wherever there were homo sapiens: they became humans. But why ritual, why do we want those moments? It's because of change. I don't know about you, but most folks find change is difficult.

If you are not sure what I mean, if you are someone who goes to a church on a regular basis *imagine* sitting on the other side of the Sanctuary than normal. Perhaps you are someone who goes to sporting events and you've always sat right at the blue line, and then one day someone gives you tickets and you get to sit at the centre line and it's great, but really it's also kind of disconcerting because it's not normal. Or perhaps today you came to church and that's not your normal. Whenever we are in those places of not normal, there is a feeling of vulnerability, of wonder about our safety, and there is also a seeking out of meaning; what is the meaning of this vulnerability, of this time. *And what rituals and rites of passage do in every single human culture is say*: yes you are in a vulnerable time, you are also being held by a community, and we will see you through this until you find your new normal.

A wonderful example last week, we baptized a baby; a vulnerable baby who was fully dependent on his mother and her community. Parents, anyone who has either been a parent or looked after a child for any longer than two hours knows the pressure of being responsible for another life. And, babies aren't great at giving us things like regular sleeping patterns, regular eating patterns, so that time of your life where you are already kind of vulnerable, you are also absolutely exhausted.

It is in that time *when the church says*: Will you come and let us put water on your child's head? Because we want you to know you are not alone, we acknowledge the vulnerability of your child and your new role as parent. And we are going to walk with you until the day when they turn approximately ... (depends on the child) and you get to sleep through the night, and you will begin a new normal."

We also had an example this Wednesday evening; it's called Ash Wednesday. It's the official beginning of Lent and again we do something very odd; we take remnants of something we did last year and we literally, at this church anyway, literally burn them and then putting a small bit of oil with those ashes, we mark ourselves or another, usually with the sign of a heart or a cross. And we mark ourselves with ashes to show that all of us live while we are dying. That all of us live in that vulnerable time between birth and death and that alone is frightening, *and so we say*

*to one another:* We are not alone. We will be together through this time and when you forget that there is life after death in some mysterious form we call love, I will remind you and you can remind me when I forget.

Over the coming weeks we are going to be looking at different rights and rituals that hold us in these vulnerable times of life and that help us transition from who we were to who we are becoming. They also will show us the different aspects of what Jesus is going through in this scripture; grief. Today we hear that upon not only losing a friend to illness, but seeing that friends' family's tears, Jesus wept. He expressed what was going on within him through tears.

Tears are absolutely essential and I believe that every loss and change in your life has a particular amount of tears that are going to need to be shed because of that loss. Now humans are all different; the amount of tears that someone might shed at the loss of a pet might be completely different to the amount of tears that I would need to shed at the loss of a pet, but they still must be shed.

And what happens to water when it is held back, not allowed to flow, not allowed to empty out so it can refill? It becomes stagnant. This is why often we weep at something we see on the news and while it is sad we are actually weeping tears from other past losses that have been brought out by this. Jesus wept, and it allowed him to *connect with a community that told him:* you are not alone, we will hold you through this time and we will be ready for whatever our new normal will be.

Amen.