

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως
Longest Night Mass; 19 December 2018
St. Thomas, Glassboro – Todd Foster

Funerals or Feasting?

In nomine...

Hear the words of the preacher:

*It is better to go to the house of mourning
than to go to the house of feasting;
for this is the end of everyone,
and the living will lay it to heart.
Sorrow is better than laughter,
for by sadness of countenance the heart is made glad.
The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning;
but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth. (Eccl 7.2-4 NRSV)*

I have a confession to make. I like funerals better than weddings. Weddings can be wonderful. But people are usually more than a little uptight. There's tension in the air. I see forced smiles pasted over top of anxious faces. Weddings leave me exhausted and sadly cynical, knowing that more than half of marriages end in divorce, and that many young couples, especially, won't darken the door of a church again until they have children, or even until their children reach adolescence. The only sure thing at the end of a wedding is that there are some hard times ahead. If you've been married, you know this is true.

But at a funeral, the drama is already done. The last page has been written. We know how things turn out. Often, though not always, there are tears, and maybe some sobbing. Sometimes the tears come later. But whenever they come, they're honest tears. They're tears born of experience and they're tears of genuine love. Love that has been tested and tried, love that has failed and gotten back up again, love that reflects the deep roots someone has planted in another's heart.

Grief and sadness are not the companions we're taught to choose. Your friends may look askance at you for expressing them. But grief has deep meaning and import. Grief means we have been in relationship. However broken or disrupted or strained or disconnected, there's an entanglement there, like two particles seen through the lens of quantum physics.

Grief is not something we ask for. I don't believe it is something God wishes on us. But it is part of the experience of God, something Jesus clearly manifested at the tomb of his friend Lazarus. And as we bear the image of God, it is our experience as well.

John Pavlovitz has written, "I want Grief to leave. But then I realize that (it) hasn't come here uninvited to do me damage. It has come here to surprise me with a gift that I hadn't asked for, wouldn't say I wanted, but so desperately need. The gift...is this terrible, painful bittersweetness that *reminds me just how well loved I was* to be feeling such sadness now. This heartbreak is a monument, these tears a tribute."

Grief means that you are not alone. Grief means that God is near. Grief means you love, and you are loved.

Advent is a season of darkness, a season of anticipation. That's what grief is, isn't it? Grief is an absence, a hollowness, an empty space inside. Grief is a deposit, a down-payment on the love of God for which the full payment will, without a doubt be made.

At Christmas we celebrate the coming of the one who would pay that debt. We celebrate the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy of comfort for God's people. We celebrate the coming of a light into the world that the darkness could not overcome.

So for some people this is the season of Jingle Bells and Hallmark movies and Santa Clause. I'm glad for them. That's good.

But Christmas is also about unaccompanied minors flying halfway across the country from one parent's house to the other. It's about a million little things that we did last year, but this year the one who did them is absent, or I am less able. It's about the remembrance of a hurt that happened 40 years ago, or of one that is fresh this month. It's about choices that may not have served me well, or about things that happened that I could do nothing about at all.

These are all a part of Advent. These are just the things that Jesus came to be a part of. Born into poverty, a political refugee who fled into Africa, misunderstood and betrayed by those who were closest to him, crucified for a love that was too big to fit in. Christmas is about God the Creator of the Universe departing from a hypothetical world of bliss, and choosing to dwell in the messy, dirty, unfair, inexplicable world of grief. Because even that grief can be redeemed, and even in grief, God's reach is not to be thwarted.

Bring your grief to Advent. If you don't feel joy at Christmas, accept this holiday as a promise, a down-payment, of God's intention for you. All those annoying, laughing people are a sign, a symbol, and a token of something to which you are coming on a deeper path.

God's promise is sure. The drama is already done. The last page has been written. We know how things turn out. Resurrection follows death as surely as day follows night. If now is your night, that means you have received already the promise of a new dawn. Here at St. Thomas', we have gathered to wait for the dawn together.

Amen.

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