

Sermon for the Fifth Sunday in Lent: John 11:1-45

The Rev. Brooks Cato

My great-grandfather Chester was a mean old man. I've mentioned him to y'all before; he's the one, I'm ashamed to admit, spent part of his life in Oklahoma, and worse yet, Texas. Chester worked the oil fields, and somewhere along the way met and fell for my great-grandmother Pebble. I never knew them as a young couple, so I never saw their courtship. I was too young to care to learn how they'd met. All I cared about was their rowdy Boston Terrier and giving Grandpa Chester a wide berth. If you can imagine two chainsaws being married, that's what I remember of their relationship. Sparks flew, yes, but not the kind you like to see. The kind of sparks that make you grateful that these two angry people found each other rather than inflicting themselves on anyone else.

I don't remember how Chester died, but I suspect it was out of pure meanness. Pebble died several years later in her 90s. She was born in 1899, and I swear she died before 2000 just to keep us from having the satisfaction of knowing someone that lived in three centuries. Chester and Pebble were, in my mind, always old. By the time I can remember them, they already had that Dorothea Lange look of sun and wind-worn hillbillies, faces with deep wrinkles hiding years of sorrow and hardship, like yellowed hedge apples with eyes. They were supposed to be, in my little mind, they were supposed to be like that always. They were supposed to be that particular brand of hard-lived and ornery forever. And then they died. To be honest, my life didn't change all that much because of that fact. Chester's death meant I had a freer run of the property to chase that Boston terrier around. Pebble's meant I had one less relative to watch wrasslin with. She was, you see, a die-hard Hulk Hogan fan. I "helped" my aunt go through the house and figure out which pieces of furniture were antiques worth selling, and which ones had enough water rings from years of insufficient coaster usage to keep in the family as heirlooms. My uncle moved into the house shortly after Pebble's things were cleared out, and while the Boston terrier was long gone, now I got to chase Great Danes and swim in the horses' watering trough. I don't remember missing my hedge apple great-grandparents.

I do remember my dad's dad's funeral, though. There were so many big men with dark hair in suits that I was sure he'd had connections to the mob. I do remember that one hurting. All these big men that I thought kept my world together cried. Stories didn't get told with quite the same vigor. Grandpa's hundred acre cattle farm felt empty without his massive presence. Even the fake alligator he'd nailed to a log floating in the pond lost its appeal.

My first pet to die was Shotsi, the Rottweiler. She treated us kids, but me especially, like her puppies. She was the closest thing I ever had to a nanny. When she died, living with my grandma in her big, scary house by herself, it was the day after Thanksgiving. Black Friday, I thought it was called, because the whole world knew just how much they'd lost now that Shotsi was gone.

By now, I've seen Death many times. Sometimes I've seen its calling card before it arrives. Sometimes I've arrived just after it's left. And sometimes, sometimes I've been there long enough to shake its hand and ask for it to stay away a little longer next time. But Death has a way of bringing itself closer and closer in. This is a hard reality of our lives. It always is. Many of us fear it. Some have grown oddly comfortable with it. Some long for it to return. But we all know it's there. The problem is, there are moments when that knowledge of Death is a bit more pronounced. In times of war, say, we know that Death comes more frequently. But something of the order of things is inverted. The young and promising die faster than their parents. Our side suffers undue losses while the other side creeps toward defeat.

But we do not find ourselves in that place. We find ourselves in a time when Death comes in sobering numbers and the quick tease of its hand brushes even more. This disease blankets our lives, makes us forget that

life and death go on. The things that happen to people are still happening, but an added darkness lies on top of it all. Death feels a little closer, still, our control pulled from our grip, accompanied by the looming figures of the 24-hour News Cycle, Statistical Projection, and Epidemiological Reality. It's times like these that bring our theological assumptions into focus. What of our beliefs are essential? What holds to the indiscriminate reality we see unfolding? And where, in all of this, is the Good News?

For me, it's stories like the ones we just heard. Our God raises the dead, a truth we'll one day see. Yes, that's important. The bones of Israel and the regular fella, Lazarus. To them, resurrection is very, very real. And for us, perhaps, there's hope in that, too. But for me, where I find most hope is somewhere altogether different. I look toward the coming resurrection with hope, yes, but for now, my comfort is somewhere else. Where I find my comfort is in the story of Job, when he loses everything and everyone he cares for and is ridiculed by those who remain, he kicks at the heels of God. And God honors his faithfulness. Where I find my comfort is in the story of Israel & Judah broken under the weight of empires, and all they've known and loved is razed. They slump into the rubble and cry out. And God honors their faithfulness. Where I find my comfort is in the story of Martha and Mary, when their brother dies and their friend that could've saved him finally returns, they weep at his feet and point their fingers. And Jesus weeps. And God honors their faithfulness. In that story, Jesus doesn't cause Lazarus' illness or his sisters' suffering. But he does show up in their midst, hears the pain of their loss, and feels it deeply himself.

You know, "Jesus wept," in the King James Version, is a trivia question. It's the shortest verse in the Bible, and beyond that, I'm not sure how many folks give it any thought. But why he wept matters. He wept because we hurt, and he wept because he did, too. The translation we use says "Jesus began to weep." But it never says he stopped. I'm sure he did, but the text never says Jesus composed himself, put on a brave face, and stood to work his miracle. In fact, when he rises to go to Lazarus' tomb, he's still "greatly disturbed." Choking through his tears, he turns to God and prays. And in that bittersweet moment rests my hope and my comfort, even now. While Death draws closer and that shadow looms over us all, God is here with us. While news reports dismay and numbers soar, God is here with us. And while the beginning of a cough or a shudder from a chill draws our anxiety to the surface, God is here with us. That's one of Jesus' names, you know: Immanuel. Immanuel makes room for all that we bring. For our fear, our anger, our sadness. For our illnesses, our infirmities, our heartbreaks. For our joys, our hopes, our longings for better times. For us. That's where I find my hope. Thanks be to God, Immanuel, God is with us.