

SAD SONGS AND BIBLE STORIES

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

January 21, 2007

Scripture: Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10; Luke 4:14-21

There is a Seinfeld episode in which Jerry is dating a woman who cries all the time at sad movies. Jerry, who has romantic hopes for her finds the crying off-putting and in the last scene of the episode the attractive woman is sitting on one end of the sofa and Jerry on the other, as we overhear his thoughts.

“I probably should go over and put my arm around her,” he says. “She’s doing this because she wants me to hold her. I suppose that would be the right thing to do. But, I’m not going to do it.” He pauses a little longer as the credits roll on the screen, she dabs her tears, and his mind continues to work overtime. “What is it with this crying? She’ll shrink my new sweater. I’m not going over there.”¹

Well, Jerry’s is neither the first date nor the last to be foiled by yet another replay of *Titanic* or *The Way We Were*. Little is more off-putting to a romantic mood than tears.

But there is no getting around the fact that tears are the barometer of what moves us. They wash away the sadness of our hearts, they empty the wells of disappointment and feeling within us. They help us over the times when there is truly something to cry about. We cry when something deep inside us is touched, and our story connects with another story.

The conventional wisdom is that women are more expressive about their feelings, but even men cry sometimes. Even soldiers cry when another soldier with whom they have trained, been through the same boot camp, shipped out in the same reserve unit, slept in the same bunker, ridden in the same armored vehicle is killed or wounded.

To be cut off from the place within us from which our deepest feelings rise, tears *or* laughter, is to be disconnected from that place where our life finds its greatest meaning.

There are at least three memorable places in scripture where weeping is mentioned. The first is every Sunday School child’s delight who is required to memorize a bible verse and recite it back to the class. It’s John 11:35, the shortest verse in the Bible, “Jesus wept.” It is Jesus’ reaction to the news that his dear friend Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha, has died and has been laid in a tomb. It doesn’t help that Mary tells Jesus that it wouldn’t have happened if he had been there. But he wasn’t, and it had.

The second situation that comes to mind where weeping is mentioned is that psalm of lament sung by the exiles taken in captivity, when the Babylonians taunted the Israelites, “Sing us one of the songs of Zion,” they laughed as they stood over the exiles. And so the psalmist of the 137th psalm remembers, “By the waters of Babylon - there we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion... How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?”

This is the lament of every refugee who has ever been forced from home or family. It is the elegy of the families of Darfur, the cries of Sunnis suffering at the hands

of Shiites in Iraq, of marines kneeling over the bodies of shattered friends. It is the corporate memory of a better time, and happier days that are no more.

The third time that weeping is memorably mentioned in scripture is that passage read today from Nehemiah, chapter 8. The setting is Jerusalem, but a Jerusalem that looks more like Baghdad or Beirut or even New Orleans today. The aftermath of catastrophe lies everywhere. Trash piled on rubble, large stones that once were foundations lying disassembled, smoking debris here and there, shells of buildings left abandoned, the stench of rotting flesh, the brokenness of what happens when humanity is beset by inhumanity.

It's 2400 years ago in royal David's city, and there is not much left. The Israelites have been away from their great city for five decades, fifty years in exile and there is not much there. The walls are breached. The towers have fallen. There is no security for the city.

Into the midst of this chaos walked Nehemiah, a builder and a planner, the Robert Moses of his time, without the Cross Bronx Expressway, a man who envisioned a great city returned to its former glory. More effective than a Larry Silverstein, he actually got people working, started his own Habitat for Humanity corps, and before long the walls of Jerusalem were being patched and repaired, mortar was being mixed, and stones lifted into place. The watch towers were going up again, and Jerusalem had a modicum of protection against its enemies.

A bit of the old spirit was starting to come back among the dispirited ones. But something was missing. The city was looking more like itself, but not quite. What was it that they lacked?

They gathered by the Water Gate in the old walled city. Their hands were blistered and calloused, their feet sore and tired, their faces sunburned, their arms and legs aching from the weariness of the lifting and shoveling and mixing and troweling they had done.

Tired as they were, they gathered at the Water Gate to do something that they had not been allowed to do when they were exiles. They congregated to hear God's word. They who had been robbed of their history needed to hear their story embedded in God's story, so that the story they were living could make sense again.

Sensing their need, they called for the scribe Ezra to bring out the law of Moses, unroll the scroll, blow off the dust, and read to them again the story of who and whose they were.

Like children who long to hear just one more time some well rehearsed family story about how granddad piloted a plane in the war, or how hard it was to get to the hospital the day that they were born, or the night that you spent in the storm cellar when the tornado came through town, they ached to hear their story one more time, to get lost in it, and thereby found.

A friend of mine tells me his children never tire of looking at the pictures in the album of when they were infants and hearing the stories of their first steps, their first word, the earaches and croup that kept their parents up all night. For the returned exiles, it was like that, hearing again the stories and looking again at the pages that told them

who they had been, so that they would have some context for understanding who they were. What they heard was a story of fear and bravery, of slavery and freedom, of despair and hope.

Ezra came forth with the scroll in his hands, and they stood up as if some great dignitary had entered the room. Yet it was not Ezra for whom they stood, but God. And they remained standing and listening from early morning until midday as Ezra gave them back their story.

He read the account of creation, of Adam and Eve and Abraham and Sarah, childless and without a hope for the future. He read to them of the first exile, the Egyptian captivity, and the exodus that led them out, the story of the Red Sea, the parting waves, the wanderings in the wilderness.

He read about God leading Israel as a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. And he read the commandments, and the covenants that God had given to them, the promise that “I will be your God and you will be my people, and your descendants will be as many as the sand at the seashore and as the stars in the heavens.”

And maybe it was this last part, the vision of the future, and the great love that lay behind it, the promise of nearness that God gave Israel, the idea that they were God’s great love and consuming passion, (it was probably that), that cut Israel to the heart, and made them realize just how much God loved them, they who felt most unloved and most unfortunate. And they began to weep.

They cried for all that they had been through. They cried that their story was recovered. They cried with joy at where they now were. They cried for all that was yet to come, the hope of it and the power of it, and the sadness of it as well. For it was in the story that Ezra read that they became lost that day, and discovered, at last, that they had been found.

Most of us are aliens to scripture these days. We are more likely to read something from the bestseller list in *The New York Times* than we are to pick up the Bible and read its stories, which are our stories. I say that not as a matter of shame, but simply to acknowledge the truth that we are living in a time and we are a people as hungry as was Israel after the exile to hear some word from God, to hear again our story in the context of God’s story.

We long to make sense of life against the backdrop of something eternal and unchangeable, a Word that only God can give. And we listen and yearn for it, and stand on tiptoes leaning forward, reaching for it like a life preserver thrown from the shore offered in a stormy sea.

Sometimes the power of scripture is so strong that it breaks us down, and in so doing, builds us up, opening us to a new future on the far side of weeping.

What is it any of us wants? Is it not the same as what those exiles wanted; to know that we are not forgotten, that our story is somehow folded into the larger story that God is telling. And that God sees us and knows us and has not forgotten us.

Yesterday I spent several hours with someone who is at the end of life. Cancer, a long and brave battle. She was anxious and agitated, weary of weariness, tired of fighting, but not yet at peace with what is happening to her.

We talked of many things; of her life, her children, of a war long ago and a childhood far away. When the time came for me to leave, she made the agonizing effort to stand, against my protests that she shouldn't even try. Until I realized that she wasn't doing it (standing up) for me, she was doing it for her. She wanted my arms around her, to hold her and kiss her cheek, and look her in the eye and say goodbye. I did, and as we stood, there was a pause and a tear and she said, "Please don't forget me."

She was asking me to keep her in my prayers and to come back soon, which I will, but also she was asking me not to forget her in my life. Which is, I think, what all of us want to know, isn't it, that our lives are not wasted, not water poured on the sand, but that at least in some one's memory we will be remembered.

This past week Mayor Bloomberg gave the state of the city address. He promised lower property taxes and better schools, the usual things you get to say when there is a \$2 billion surplus of revenue. It all sounded very encouraging.

For a city that was under siege only five years ago, dealt a mortal wound one September morning, the recovery has been quite remarkable. But I couldn't help but think that like those exiles so long ago, as we rebuild the walls and strengthen the towers and inhabit our dwellings once again as we are, our greatest need is not lower taxes or higher bonuses, or more wealth, but a deeper understanding of who and whose we are in the eyes of God.

Like those exiles who knew that in spite of strong walls and high towers their real strength was found in the Word of God we know that a city that has no soul is no city at all.

At the end of the Bible, in the book of Revelation there is a description of a new city, a new Jerusalem. It is a glorious vision of a city built by God. And so John writes:

And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals.

God will dwell with them and they will be God's people, and God himself will be with them; and he will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more; for the former things have passed away.

It is a glorious vision, a vision of a city and a people who are not forgotten. Some day, we will live in a city like that. Some day.

Until that day, there are tears along the way, sad songs and Bible stories, wars and rumors of wars, exile and returning, a story that is God's story, but a story that is ours as well, until both the stories are one, a story of God's love.

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¹ This is a loose reconstruction of the dialogue, not a literal transcription.