

Grieving with Hope - In Memoriam Sunday
Co-Pastor Susanne Guenther Loewen
NPMC – Nov. 20, 2022

Scripture: Psalm 139:1-12; 1 Thess. 4:13-14, 18; Isaiah 25:6-10

Hymns: Nothing Is Lost on the Breath of God – VT 653; My Life Flows On – VT 605

Psalm 139:1-12

¹ O LORD, you have searched me and known me.

² You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.

³ You search out my path and my lying down
and are acquainted with all my ways.

⁴ Even before a word is on my tongue,
O LORD, you know it completely.

⁵ You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me.

⁶ Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is so high that I cannot attain it.

⁷ Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?

⁸ If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.

⁹ If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,

¹⁰ even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.

¹¹ If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and night wraps itself around me,"

¹² even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to you.

1 Thessalonians 4:13-14, 18

¹³ But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. ¹⁴ For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died. ¹⁸ Therefore encourage one another with these words.

Isaiah 25:6-10:

On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples
a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines,
of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.

⁷ And he will destroy on this mountain
the shroud that is cast over all peoples,
the covering that is spread over all nations;

⁸ he will swallow up death forever.

Then the Lord GOD will wipe away the tears from all faces,
and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth,

for the LORD has spoken.
⁹ It will be said on that day,
“See, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us.
This is the LORD for whom we have waited;
let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.”
¹⁰ For the hand of the LORD will rest on this mountain.

I recently picked up a new book on grief called, *A Hole in the World*, by Amanda Held Opelt. As part of her name implies, the author is the sister of the late Rachel Held Evans, the Christian writer who gave voice to a generation and tragically died in her mid-30s. Held Opelt’s book is an effort to come to terms with the loss of her sister, which was couched in a series of losses that occurred for her within two years: the loss of her grandmother, whose funeral she was unable to attend, a term working in a war-zone and witnessing trauma and violence there, three miscarriages as she and her spouse struggled with infertility, and the sudden, untimely loss of her sister in 2019. “I’ve suffered through a season of loss,” she says. Oh, right – and just after all of this, a global pandemic began, with its vast wake of grief and loss.¹

Held Opelt realized, as she trudged through her valley of the shadow of death, that our culture doesn’t deal all that well with grief and loss. “The weeks that followed my sister’s death were a flurry of funeral planning, taking care of kids, and driving back and forth between my home and hers. The tasks, to-do lists, and trivialities of life had taken over my grieving process. ... [I]t was like I was lost in [a church] basement with foosball and flannelgraph when what I needed was a sanctuary with ashes and holy water. ...[G]enerations past had a robust array of rituals surrounding death that allowed mourners to be fully present in the *experience* of bereavement.” As we leave rituals in

¹ Amanda Held Opelt, *A Hole in the World: Finding Hope in Rituals of Grief and Healing* (New York: Worthy Publishing, 2022), 8-9.

general behind, we lose these ways of walking through pain and grief, and instead try to numb it or avoid it. “But there is no life hack for grief,” says Held Opelt.² When we lose a loved one, we can’t go around that valley. We have to go through. But, “In my hour of grief, rituals found me,” she says. “They became signposts for me along the difficult path I was walking. Rituals helped me realize that I was not alone, and I was not lost. I was simply on a journey in a strange, new land.”³

This In Memoriam service (also called Memorial or Eternity Sunday) is one of those rituals that we continue to turn to as a place to name and hold our individual and communal grief. Others include Ash Wednesday, Lent and Good Friday, and funerals and memorial services themselves. These are rituals in which we’re given permission to set aside the “stiff upper lip” approach and name the reality of death. In each of these services, we’re provided with a place to name our grief and share it in a beloved community. As Held Opelt observes, that’s becoming more rare in our wider society, with all of its attempts to avoid facing pain or death, its painting of these things as somehow failures rather than part of life.

Of course, the act of sharing these griefs – of reading the names of loved ones aloud in the presence of others today, for example – already takes a step toward making them easier to bear. This is because, as 1 Thessalonians points out, we grieve, but not as those who have no hope. There is a balance between making space for grief but also reminding us of hope. Jesus’ resurrection from the dead – however we understand that – symbolizes the defeat of death and the triumph of love over it. We can take courage that love is stronger than the power of death, even in something as

² Held Opelt, 9-11.

³ Held Opelt, 13.

simple as having a community with which to navigate one's time journeying through the valley of the shadow of death. We grieve, yes, but we also remember to hope.

Christians haven't always gotten this balance right. I've been to a funeral or two (and perhaps you have, too), where the tone was one of forced cheerfulness that shut out grief. One particular funeral sermon talked, in essence, about what a joyful day this was because the person who died gets to be with Jesus! There was no acknowledgement of the very real pain of the person's grieving family sitting in the front pew. There was no space made for them to sit with the finality of the death of their loved one. They were supposed to be happy, and anything else was not appropriate for people of faith. I found myself really discouraged after that particular funeral, precisely because of the imbalance of it. There was only hope, but a hope that glosses over the hard stuff rather than taking it up is, frankly, unhelpful.

Psalm 139 is a familiar one, and it's one that I think gets the balance between grief and hope right. The psalmist here speaks of the comfort of knowing that God is all around, that there is nowhere we can go where God is not. Interestingly, this includes "Sheol," the Hebrew word for the underworld or the realm of the dead. It says,

⁷ Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?
⁸ If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
⁹ If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
¹⁰ even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.

So in this Psalm, even the dead are included in God's loving care, and rest in the presence of God. We come from Love and we return to Love; there is nowhere we can go where Love is not. It reminds me of the lines from the prayer of St. Patrick:

Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me,
Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ on my right, Christ on my left,
Christ when I lie down, Christ when I sit down,
Christ in the heart of every[one] who thinks of me,
Christ in the mouth of every[one] who speaks of me,
Christ in the eye that sees me,
Christ in the ear that hears me.⁴

What makes In Memoriam Sunday especially meaningful is where it falls in the church calendar. It is the final Sunday of the church year, right before we turn to Advent, that season of expectation, hope, and birth. Here again, we see the space made for both grief and hope, without neglecting either of them. As we name the dear people we have lost from this congregation this year, each a bright light of this community or of individuals in our midst in their own way, we are invited to remember them. As we turn next week to the rituals of Advent and Christmas, celebrated for the first time without them, we may feel the pain of their absence particularly deeply this year. And that's understandable. There is room for the grief and the loss.⁵ But we also know, even from our place on the ash-heap of mourning, that God is on God's way, about to set the world right. That is the hope we celebrate with the coming of Advent. As we turn now to the ritual of Communion, may we be comforted by the beautiful words of Isaiah 25, where God promises a lavish banquet of "rich food and well-aged wines" to celebrate the end of death and grief. We are told that God will "destroy"

the shroud that is cast over all peoples,
the covering that is spread over all nations;

⁸ [God] will swallow up death forever.

Then the Lord GOD will wipe away the tears from all faces,
and the disgrace of [God's] people [God] will take away from all the earth,
for the LORD has spoken.

⁹ It will be said on that day,

"See, this is our God; [for whom] we have waited, so that [God] might save us.
This is the LORD for whom we have waited;
let us be glad and rejoice in [God's] salvation." Amen.

⁴ See https://www.journeywithjesus.net/PoemsAndPrayers/Saint_Patrick_Prayer.shtml

⁵ See Carol Penner, "Eternity Sunday Sermon: We are a Hopeful People," Lendrum MB Church, Edmonton, AB, Nov. 22, 2015.