



CHURCH of
the SAVIOUR

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“Why Does It Still Hurt?”

November 6, 2022

Haggai 2:3-9; Job 19:23-27

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At first it was only a stomach bug. But over the next few days, his temperature continued to rise and he was growing dehydrated. It was March, 2020. Though Isaiah Kuperstein and his wife Elana were aware of a dangerous new respiratory virus spreading rapidly around the world, they weren't personally concerned. Isaiah wasn't coughing and didn't seem to have any trouble breathing. But as his symptoms worsened, the doctor ordered a COVID test. He went straight from the testing center to the emergency room, where only patients were allowed. He was given a chest X-ray and subsequently admitted. For the first two days, he could talk on his cellphone. Once he was put on a ventilator, Elana's only connection was through the ICU nurse. Elana could barely process what was happening. It all happened so fast and she was so alone. Isaiah died in that hospital. He and Elana, married for 43 years, never got to say goodbye, never saw each other again after Isaiah went to the ER that day.¹

Their story is not uncommon. For much of the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, millions of people waited helplessly while loved ones died alone in hospitals and nursing homes. And because large gatherings were too risky, most were unable to even hold a funeral to mourn their loss. Some of you lived that devastating experience, too.

Death is always hard for those who remain. If the relationship was close, we feel the sting of losing that vital connection or point of anchor in our lives. If the relationship was troubled or fractured, we feel the ache of regret or missed opportunities for reconciliation. We may talk about bringing closure, letting go, or moving on to describe what we do to cope with death. Though, in my experience as a pastor companioning people through loss, I'm not sure that there's any such thing as closure. The people we miss may be gone from our presence, but they're never far from our hearts and our minds. Memory has a way of showing up when we least expect it. There's really no such thing as “getting over” the death of a loved one.

There is a difference between grief and mourning. *Grief* is what we feel on the inside. It is a tangled ball of emotions like sadness, confusion, anxiety, resentment, fear, and emptiness. Grief is the internal meaning given to the experience of loss. *Mourning* is the outward expression of grief, the actions we take to process the things we feel. It includes things like journaling, talking, crying, or creating art or music. As a culture, we don't do mourning well. We tend to be uncomfortable with expressing grief openly. We may feel vulnerable or ashamed to show our innermost feelings. But mourning plays an important role in processing grief. Grieving without mourning can be dangerous and destructive to our mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual health. That's one of the primary reasons I counsel people not to put off funerals or memorial services too long. And it's one of the things that was so tragic about the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in the early stages. We couldn't gather to mourn our losses, so our grief was left untethered. We need ritual moments of mourning to help us grieve well.

The death of a loved one is an intense time of grief, but it is by no means the only one. We grieve when relationships end, when we change employment, when we move from one place to another, when the future we hoped for doesn't come, when we experience changes in our health, even holidays when we don't feel what we think we're supposed to feel. Loss is a part of what it means to be alive. And whenever we experience loss, we grieve.

How many of those things have we experienced over the last few years? Think back over the last 3, 4, 5 years, and just reflect for a moment on the losses we've experienced individually or collectively and their impact on you. How many of those moments of grief have we had the time or space to adequately mourn? What rituals help us make meaning of our losses? Where do we find space to process our feelings? Or do we just buck it up and keep going? All of those things have a compounding effect. Unfortunately, we haven't dealt with them very well.

Our faith can help us. The story of God's people is a story of great relationship and promise, but it is also a story of loss and pain. *Being held in captivity as slaves in Egypt. Wandering in the wilderness for 40 years awaiting the*

¹ <https://www.npr.org/2020/04/11/832572957/saying-goodbye-to-a-loved-one-from-a-distance>

Promised Land. Oppression under the leadership of unfaithful kings. Defeat and exile at the hands of foreign powers. Loss of homeland and religious identity when the Temple was destroyed – not once, but twice. Seeing the promised Messiah, the Son of God, humiliatingly executed. Being scattered and pursued by enemies. Killed and killing, suffering and causing suffering, breaking covenant and being called to repentance. Our scriptures are filled with stories of loss. But they also offer language of lament, powerful acts of mourning and longing that express pain. And they offer words of hope – a promise that no matter how intensely alone we may feel, God is never far from us.

When God’s people were living in exile, cut off from their homes and the only life they’d ever known, they were in despair. The psalmist wrote:

By the rivers of Babylon—
there we sat down, and there we wept
when we remembered Zion.
On the willows there
we hung up our harps.
For there our captors
asked us for songs,
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,
“Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”
How could we sing the Lord’s song
in a foreign land?

After more than a generation in Babylon, God’s people were given permission to begin to return to Jerusalem. But the homeland they returned to was in ruins. It would take years and every resource they had to rebuild. Those who had only heard tales of Jerusalem’s greatness struggled to grasp the vision of what could be. Those who remembered were traumatized by the sight of all they had lost. In this moment the prophet Haggai offered the words we read in worship today: *Look around. What do you see? How does Jerusalem look to you? It may look like nothing now, but I tell you that with God’s help what it will be is greater than what it was. Your best days are ahead of you, not behind.*

Some of you here today know what it means to look at the house you inhabit and see it differently than you did before. An empty chair. A table that used to be the center of life where you now feel painfully alone. A blanket, or a book, or a coffee cup that you hold close just to remember for a moment. A room you can’t bring yourself to enter.

You don’t have to have experienced the death of a loved one during the past few years to feel the weight of grief. But if you have, your grief has been more intense. That’s why days like today are so important. That’s why communities of faith and love and support are so vital. We need to gather, to come together and practice lament, to mark our losses, to mourn together. And we need one another to offer encouragement, to remember how to hope.

Worship is one ritual that helps us make sense of things too big to make sense of in everyday life. Our songs and prayers, even our movement and posture, are acts of ritual. We have remembered today our saints in naming them and lighting candles in their memory. In a few moments, you’ll have an opportunity to name in your hearts the saints who have been a part of your life and to light a candle to symbolize the light they shared with you, a light to symbolize their life that in Christ will never end. We will celebrate Holy Communion, a ritual that reminds us of Christ’s sacrifice, a sharing in the holy ritual he offered to his disciples. But Communion is also a ritual of hope. We celebrate all that Christ has done by his love. He came into the world to meet us in our need. He lived our life, knew our grief, died our death, and rose for our sake. We celebrate because we know what looks like the end is not the end; it’s only a passage to what’s next. With Job, we can say, “I know that my Redeemer lives.” Because he lives, we too know the promise of eternal life. Worship today offers us a time to heal. It is a ritual of mourning, but also an audacious declaration of hope.

Today is a marker moment. It is only a moment in a long process of healing, but it is an *important* moment. Let us bow in remembrance, face our pain, and acknowledge all we have lost. But let us also lift up our eyes to see the One who comes to bring us hope, and remember that we are not alone. Thanks be to God. Amen.