New Hope Global Sermon: Trusting God in grief and loss 6 8 22

**Introduction:**

*Daily Light on the Daily Path* caught my attention Monday morning (June 6) with the header for the morning scriptures: “God will quiet you in His love.” It’s a text from Zephaniah 3: 17.

Issues of grief and loss has surfaced in many people’s experiences and the books I’ve reviewed this past year. Covid’s often deadly morphing and restrictions within countries trying to contain the virus have taken a toll. There are fresh wars that ravage nations, and long-standing wars that bring despair and hopelessness. There are mass murders that are escalating in the US, as well as the on-going battles with cancer, Alzheimers, heart diseases etc. which continue to claim their victims. And now with Russia’s continual bombardment and aggression in Ukraine, blocking the shipment of grain to the rest of the world, we even have the specter of global famine.

In addition, my own personal journey with Keith’s deterioration in Alzheimers has come to the point that this week (on Friday) we move him to a live-in Memory Care center nearby. It’s a blessing and a time of grief and loss. All this to say that the issue of trusting God in suffering is centerstage for millions of people this very week – including both Keith and I and our family.

Ofttimes in the midst of trouble and grief, loss can dim or override our understanding of the goodness or God, the healing presence of God, and the hope and comfort God seeks to give to us moment by moment. We focus on our cup being half empty or even drained dry. But our ability to move forward with resurrection energy comes from a renewed trust in our God.

Lee Eclov says “Faith revitalizes us with the breath of God’s life day in and day out, now and forever.” (My Dear Shepherds, *Preaching Today*, pp. 36-37). My prayer is that this sermon will provide that revitalizing breath of God for all of us as we lay our laments before Him and refocus on God’s character and rock-solid promises.

**No ostrich-style faith**

The book I am reviewing this week (another 5 star!) is *Broken Hallelujahs, Learning how to grieve the big and small losses of life* by Beth Allen Slevecove, IVP, 2016. Some quotables from her book start us off with a reality check:

* Winston Churchill: “If you’re going through hell, keep going” (Slevecove, p. 67).
* Anne Morrow Lindbergh: “It isn’t for the moment you are stuck that you need courage, but for that long uphill climb back to sanity and faith and security” (p.92).
* John of the Cross: “A soul will never grow until it is able to let go of the tight grasp it has on God” (p.169).
* And Rachel Naomi Remen: “The secret of living well is not in having all the answers but in pursuing unanswerable questions in good company”(p. 175).

Churchill was never one to mince words or speak euphemisms. In his quip, which is not theological but psychological, he captures the emotional torment people can experience in seemingly endless suffering without hope. For me with Keith my current loss began in his early stages of Alzheimers. Over the past decade I have progressively lost his companionship, his character of kindness, his ability to pray together or discuss at length, his protection, and his very person. Alzheimers progressively destroys the brain and all the brain’s connections to vital organs; it becomes a destroyer of persons. Keith continues to lose so much each week and has now become unsafe to himself and to others. That is why we need to put him in a memory care live-in facility with other Alzheimer and dementia residents and a caring, capable, well-trained staff. That causes us both grief. But through it all, he has not lost his faith. When he has coherent moments, he can still articulate the joy of heading to heaven and the blessing of that reality for him and all those who love Jesus. Nor has he lost his ability to reaffirm his love for me. That’s wonderful. But the burdens of his increased negative transformation and anger and confusion have been very wearing and stressful. God knows all that. But caregivers need to admit our feelings as well. Only when we pour out our real feelings and desolation to God, ourselves and others, as David did in the lament Psalms, are we on the road to properly coping with the sufferings and moving through them. Trying falsely to sugar-coat our stressful reality will prolong our suffering.

Lindbergh speaks about the reality of the long climb back from negative thinking to a place of a sound mind, faith and security. Healing from loss and grief is not a fast food McDonalds process. It is “a long uphill climb” (p. 92). John of the Cross’s quote tells us why we often get ourselves into these dark, stuck places – we have an unrealistic understanding of what and when and how our deliverance should come from God. In that sense we are exercising our own mental control over God. Naturally this won’t work, but we need to release our false expectations in faith and trust Him for His wisdom and leadership of our lives.

And finally, Remen’s quote highlights the necessity of going through grief and loss (or any suffering) in the safety and security of community. Sometimes we need others to carry us to Jesus when we are too weary to get there on our own. In all circumstances we need the power of a praying team who can pray God’s strength and perspective and grace into us so we can press on and believe in God’s love and sustaining presence. Christian friends really do multiply the hope and comfort and help divide and shoulder the burdens and pain.

**Promises of God’s love and blessing**

On the positive side, we return to Zephaniah 3:17. The promise that God will quiet His people in His love is part of Zephaniah’s encouragement to the people of Israel. They had been under the judgment of God because of their disobedience, but toward the end of his letter, Zephaniah tells them God is still mighty to save, but that God has also called each believer into His “love, delight and rejoicing in them” (James Bruckner, *NIV Application Commentary, Jonah, Nahum, Habbakuk and Zephaniah,* p.331. ) Here is this verse in the context of God’s promise:

Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem! 15The Lord has taken away the judgments against you; he has cleared away your enemies…The Lord, is in your midst; you shall never again fear evil. 16On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: 17The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; **he will quiet you by his love**; he will exult over you with loud singing.”

Text

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Times when our suffering seems endless, and God does not seem to be answering our prayers on our time table, can cause inner turmoil. There is no quietness in our souls. Instead, there are multitudes of anxious thoughts tearing through us. As it says in Psalm 94:18-19 “When I said, ‘My foot is slipping,’ your love, O Lord, supported me. When anxiety was great within me, Your consolation brought joy to my soul.” This is the truth of God’s character, beloved. I have tasted and seen it in my own experience through the decades.

So, the promises in the Zephaniah passage are all the more sweet. The God of Zephaniah never changes. He wants His love to be our covering and deep place of security, support and consolation; his delight in us takes away the sense of turmoil that loss and grief create. He is so delighted in us He even “exults over us with loud singing.” Now that is something I can’t wait to hear in heaven!

These are the promises and the biblical reality I want to call us all back to, beloved. I want us to reach out to the Lord and ask for open ears to hear His consolations. I want us to trust Him to deal with our anxieties and the countless burdens that come in carrying another’s pain. I want us to recognize God’s support and the light He brings out of darkness. I want us to hold on to the His promises and to the other people, the “good companionship” of those who journey with us through the suffering. All these realities quiet our anxious thoughts.

Finally, I have one other scripture portion that I know I will rely on in the next weeks and that I have relied on in the past - Psalm 73: 26. This, too, is a way God speaks to quiet us in His love:

“My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.”



That is the bottom line. God knows what wounds our heart, but He can mend us and heal us. He gives us His strength. He surrounds us with the awareness of His love. He is our portion. God quiets us in His love.

Dorothy Hsu captures the pathos and the hope of this healing journey through grief and loss in her book mending. She wrote it several months after the sudden death of her young husband. They had only been married 9 months and he leeft her and their two young girls. Er own loss and grief was compounded as she had to raise these young girls alone. Here is her poem on Mending:

I’ve been mending my Bible today,

The one that was his.

So many pages were ripped and

Some had corners missing.

It was a formidable job.

I used “the miracle tape,”though,

The kind that doesn’t crack

Or yellow with age.

It really is almost invisible.

You’ve been taping me up, too,

Haven’t You, Lord?

My heart was completely torn in two.

You’re patching it up with you

Special miracle tape.

It’s invisible,

And it won’t crack or yellow with age.

In a few years,

You and I will be the only

Ones who know it’s there.” (Dorothy Hsu, *Mending*, Master’s Books Publishing, 2011, p.109.)

She is experiencing being quieted by the Lord. Amen, beloved!

Let us pray. Lord, make these scriptural truths real in our experience. May the light of Your countenance shine on us and bring us Your peace (Num.6:24-26). In Jesus’ name. Amen.

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