

Sermon for Sunday, April 7, 2019 - "Joy from Tears"

Fifth Sunday in Lent
April 7, 2019
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

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Preaching text - Psalm 126

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus who has entered the wilderness with us.

God promises, through our Psalm today, that: "Those who sowed with tears will reap with songs of joy. Those who go out weeping, carrying the seed, will come again with joy, shouldering their sheaves."

Today I want to tell you that I have discovered, deep in my bones, that this promise is true. It is true for you as well.

But first I need to confess that, apparently, I've been ignoring scripture this week - specifically, that line in our first reading today, "Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old." See, I've been doing a lot of looking back this week. Thursday was my daughter Abby's birthday and I spent a lot of time remembering the joyous day she was born.

Wednesday was my dearest friend Sarah's birthday. Almost every year, from the time Sarah turned 19 until she turned 42, I got to be with her sometime around her birthday - well except the year Abby was born. Sarah's 42nd birthday was the last we celebrated together, however, as she died later that year of a brain aneurysm. This week I spent a lot of time remembering Sarah and not just because it was her birthday, but I'll get to that.

Sarah and I met the very first day of first-year orientation at Luther College. We grew so close over four years of college and then four years together at Luther Seminary. We bonded over the joys and sorrows of ministry, marriage and motherhood. We were godmothers to each other's children. Our families vacationed together. When my parents died she came right away - each time. We were so close that I didn't invest much in other friendships.

Sarah was a great pastor and I learned so much from her. She had a way of showing everyone she met that they were important to her and important to God. She was passionate about supporting women in ministry. Sarah had the most wonderful, joyful laugh - you just couldn't help but laugh and smile in her presence.

When Sarah died, I didn't know how I would carry on as a person, much less as a pastor, spouse and mom. I also was only one year into new my call here. I didn't want to have so many tears at the beginning of ministry among you all. But I did cry. I cried all the way through the service here on the Sunday after Sarah's death. Good Shepherd members stepped in to preach and lead and I got to sit in the back, worshiping and crying.

The next day, I helped to lead Sarah's funeral along with the associate pastor at Sarah's church, Ashley, and a pastor friend of Sarah's named Regina. Together with 800 other people, we cried and laughed our way through the day, remembering Sarah and remembering God's promises. My sister, two aunts, and a new friend, Stacey, each drove three hours to sit with me and my family at the funeral.

Now, two and a half years later, what was sowed with tears is bringing new songs of joy. The seeds planted during that time of weeping are bearing a harvest of joy.

Our preacher the day I cried through worship, Amalia Vagts, is now in seminary. The fact that she could prepare a powerful sermon with very short notice that week was just another affirmation that God is calling her into ministry. I have shared tears and deep joy in ministry here among you. Friends from Luther College have reached out and old friendships have rekindled. Ashley, Regina and I are now dear and close friends. Together, with Sarah's husband Dan, we oversee the almost \$35,000 given in memory of Sarah. We've created an initiative called Extending the Table: Sarah's Invitation. The goal of the initiative is to gather and support women clergy as we lead and as we discern what God is doing in, with, and for the church in a time of change.

Last spring, the initiative provided funds to bring an excellent speaker to a regular gathering of clergy women in the La Crosse area. My friend Stacey and I got to attend this retreat. This past week, the initiative funded the first formal women clergy's gathering in Northeast Iowa. My friends Stacey, Annie, Melissa, and I planned this retreat together and it was such a beautiful time. Twenty women clergy gathered together to worship, pray and learn from Wartburg Seminary President, Louise Johnson. We shared our joys and sorrows in ministry. Our mouths were filled with laughter and our tongues with shouts of joy. We were strengthened and renewed for our service to the church.

I still carry such sorrow about Sarah's death. I will grieve her as long as I live. The ELCA has lost a great leader. Clergywomen have lost a great advocate.

Yet God is doing a new thing for me, other women clergy and our whole church. Joy has come out of the tears. God is doing what God promises to do in the Psalms and in the book of Isaiah. God says, "I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert ... to give drink to my chosen people, the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise."

Whatever tears you know, whatever wilderness you face, you are not alone. God has entered into it all in Jesus who shares our humanity, our suffering, our grief. God is in the wilderness with you and God will make a way through it.

Beloved, God keeps the promises made in scripture. This is what God does. These promises are not just for people long ago. They are not just former things of old. They are for you, for me, for all of us still today.

Along the way, God gives you water in the wilderness through the promises given to you in baptism. God gives you drink, the cup of salvation, as well as the bread of life so that you too might declare God's praise. You have what you need to walk through your own wilderness and to accompany others in theirs - to be a source of hope. You can praise trusting that joy comes out of the tears, new life comes out of death. Your mouth will be filled with laughter and your tongue with shouts of joy.

Next week we reflect on how deeply Jesus entered the wilderness with us as we remember his passion and death and resurrection. We will remember and consider these things of old. Yet, we will not only remember and look back. We will also open our eyes to see that God does a new thing for each of us - for you, and for me and for our whole hurting world.

God brings joy out of tears, life out of death, again and again.

Thanks be to God.