**Grief**

*Rev. John Allen*

Three years ago on Ash Wednesday I was in Ecuador on the first full day of a Mission Trip to an orphanage with 10 members of my previous church. It wasn’t necessarily a plan to be there on Ash Wednesday, it just happened. And as the Pastor on the trip, the group asked me to plan a brief service. So I worked on it in my notebook on the plane. And I prayed that TSA, or customs, wouldn’t confiscate the little plastic ziplock sandwich bag of ashes I had tucked in my suitcase.

They didn’t. So a few days after we arrived, in a corner of the common room of the orphanage we sat in a circle. We read scripture. We prayed. And then my 10 church members formed a line to receive the mark of ashes on their foreheads.

As soon as they stood up, almost instinctively the entire staff of the orphanage joined the line. Bringing with them children as young as 3. Suddenly what I was doing in the corner became the center of attention.

I have to admit for a second I thought it was odd that people had lined up eagerly to hear what amounted to a death sentence. “From dust you are made. To dust you will return.”

But I carried out my duty.

One woman stepped forward. I scratched an ashes cross on her forehead. I whispered to her that ancient reminder that someday she would die and she began to weep bitterly. And she did not move for what felt like several minutes. And then she looked up and me and said “Thank you.”

I went to check in with her later that evening to see what it had been about, and she let me know that I was the second person to give her that news this week.

The first had been her doctor. The cancer was back. And this time there was very little that could be done.

She died not long after we returned.

I have long wondered why she thanked me for the simple smudge I placed on her forehead. But now I think I know.

I am sure she had appreciated the chorus of cheerleaders telling her to stay positive and be grateful for the blessings in her life. I am sure she smiled genuinely at everyone who praised her courage and told her to stay strong.

But in that simple moment, she was grateful that someone was able able to look her in the eye and tell her the truth she knew deep down. She was going to die.

No great wisdom on my part. I was just reading from the script.

The script of our Christian tradition.

I chose this reading, the 23rd Psalm for a sermon about grief both for what it does promise and what it does not.

This text is looked to often a source of comfort because it articles so plainly the promises of God’s love. God is imagined as a simple shepherd leading us by restful waters and nourishing pastures.

We are assured that we have a home with God that lasts forever, where a table will be generously set, and oil lusciously poured.

I have taken comfort myself from this text more than once. I suspect many of you have as well. In fact, we read it in this room yesterday at a funeral service to remind us that, even in the face of death, God’s love endures.

And then, right in the middle of the green pastures, and still waters, there is that dark valley.

Even though I walk in the darkest valley, I will fear no evil.

Or you might remember the more embellished King James Version, Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death. I will fear no evil.

That’s what it says.

Here’s what it doesn’t say.

It doesn’t say, if you are with me, I will never walk through dark valleys.

It doesn’t say when I walk through the darkest valley you will lift me up and away from all the pain.

It doesn’t say, God with you every valley is bathed in sunlight.

It tells the hard truth, tucked right there among all those comforting words. You will walk through valleys, where the bright light of God’s love seems far off, and everything is shadowed by death.

That’s grief. Any many of you know it well.

I have met some people in my life who I would describe as “happy-go-lucky” Christians. These are folks whose faith, at least outwardly, is so unflappable that the seem unable to be sad about anything at all. Always looking on the bright side. Always “just grateful for the time had with him.” Always sure “she is in a better place.”

I know they mean it. And I know they mean well. And I believe all those things and more.

But I always find assurances like that ring hollow in the face of loss and pain. I would rather hear the simple assurance in the middle of the Psalm.

You will face the shadow of death. You do not need to be afraid. God is with you.

You will face the shadow of death. You do not need to be afraid. God is with you.

Our religion is not an escape from the hardest things in life. Our faith is that God is with us in the midst of those moments of pain.

We are not in denial.

So to those of you who are grieving now, and to the rest of us who will have grieving to do ahead. The most important thing to know is this:

Our faith does not deny the pain of grief. You can trust God with all your heart, and still have your heart broken by loss.

Christianity does not ask you to pretend that death doesn’t bother you. It does not depend on you putting on a strong face.

You can believe in God, you can have faith, and still feel the deep sorrow of death.

You may spend a long time grieving. Grief takes time. It cannot be rushed. It cannot be papered over, or ignored.

Grief may knock you off your feet, it might knock your life off course. Its unavoidable.

I wish dearly that I had better news for you than that.

But I do have what I think is the best news we can ever hear.

And that is that God is with you. So you do not need to be afraid.

God is with you. You do not need to be afraid.

God is just as at home in the darkest valley as the green pasture and the still water.

God is with you. You do not need to be afraid.

Ash Wednesday is coming up, two weeks away. And I’ll be here at 8AM and 7PM of offer ashes to whoever may come by.

And sometime between those services I am going to take a little drive, and go find some church somewhere far enough away that nobody there will know me from the rest of the folks in the line.

And I am going to walk up to that minister, and she is going to scratch a cross of ashes on my forehead.

I seek out that mark because I don’t want to build my faith by ignoring death. I don’t want to be fearless because I am in denial. I want to be fearless because I know that God’s love will be with me no matter what.

And after that, she will tell me that I am made out of the dust of the Earth. And she will tell me that someday I will die.

And I’ll probably say “thank you.”

Because it’s nice to hear someone tell it like it is.