

SERMON TITLE: "Living Water: Weeping Water"
SERMON TEXT: John 11:17-44
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: August 29, 2021, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

Are you familiar with Doug Fabrizio and his RadioWest program that airs on Utah Public Radio? A couple weeks ago, he interviewed a Westminster College professor who's an expert on the Great Salt Lake. During the interview, as Professor Bonnie Baxter was talking about the drought, she mentioned that she and colleague Jaimi Butler had written an "Obituary for Great Salt Lake." I was so intrigued by what she said that I looked it up online and printed it out.

True to form, they wrote the obituary of the Great Salt Lake just like an obituary for a woman. It's about three pages long, so I won't read all of it to you. But it's quite clever, and you might like to look it up and read it yourself. Here are some excerpts:

Great Salt Lake experienced her final glimmering sunset today, succumbing to a long struggle with chronic diversions exacerbated by climate change. She was born 13,000 years ago to Lake Bonneville . . . and the Holocene Epoch, who melted ice and evaporated water . . . During her life, Great Salt Lake underwent many surgeries and amputations. She suffered blockages in her circulatory system . . . which restricted the flow of her fluids . . . Ultimately, the thirst of a rapidly growing population upstream . . . prevented her from refilling . . . The combination of terminal dehydration and high fever caused her eventual demise . . .

[Great Salt Lake] was a committed volunteer for her local environment, spending her time absorbing heavy metals and balancing nutrients. Always an avid birdwatcher, Great Salt Lake earned a Ph.D. in ornithology, observing 338 bird species over thousands of years. She was an entrepreneur, supporting an array of businesses from brine shrimp harvesting to salt extraction . . . She supported Utah's economy for many years, but we did not adequately fund her healthcare in time. Had we done so, we [might] not be mourning her death today. In lieu of flowers, conserve water . . . In keeping with her salty personality, [Great Salt Lake] requested that her admirers play the song "Another One Bites the Dust" at her memorial.¹

After five weeks of talking about living water stories from the Gospel of John, today we have come to John 11 and the story of those who cried salty, wet tears at Lazarus' death. Let's see what we can learn from this biblical story of weeping water.

1—WEEPING WATER IS A SIGN OF REAL SUFFERING

Just like all the previous living water stories in John, this one begins with real life matters of earth and water and flesh and blood. In John 11, living water turns into weeping water, and weeping water is a sign of real suffering. Right away, we are told that Lazarus was suffering from illness. We also learn that Jesus and the disciples hesitated to go to Lazarus because they knew that the authorities there wanted to harm Jesus. So they were all suffering from fear of persecution. By the time Jesus and his disciples arrived at Bethany near Jerusalem, Lazarus had already suffered unto death. And Jesus found the sisters Martha and Mary suffering in grief.

You've likely heard of Elizabeth Kübler Ross and her "five stages of grief." Those characteristics of grief include denial, anger, and bargaining. Martha and Mary demonstrated all three of those when they sent for Jesus to come and then laid on Jesus the heavy guilt that their brother would not have died if Jesus had come sooner. Their frustration and blaming came from their agony in grief. In verse 31, we read that persons consoling Mary followed her out of the house "because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there." The tears Mary and Martha and Jesus himself shed came from their sadness and pain over the loss of a brother and friend. Weeping water is a sign of real suffering.

Weeping tears of suffering is certainly something we can relate to right now. With COVID cases of sickness and death rising rapidly, with ICUs full and turning people away, we are keenly aware of the weeping water of suffering. The same can be said of persons shedding tears of worry about the tragic situation in Afghanistan. There are also many, many people who are weeping water over the loss of their homes to earthquakes, fires, hurricanes, and floods. It's a sad fact of human reality that the living water that gives us life also brings us trouble and pain. Weeping water is a sign of that very real suffering.

2—WEEPING WATER IS A SIGN OF DEEP LOVE

Fortunately, however, weeping water is also a sign of deep love. The reason that Martha, Mary, and Jesus wept in this story was that they all loved Lazarus very much. He was their dear brother and

their valued friend. This story tells us repeatedly about this love. In verse three, we hear the sister's message to Jesus: "He whom you love is ill." And, in verse five, we're told that Jesus didn't immediately rush to the rescue, even "though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus."

Because he delayed going to Lazarus, some people might question the level of Jesus' love for Lazarus and his sisters. But Jesus had his reasons. Maybe he didn't think Lazarus was going to die so soon. Maybe Jesus knew he could raise Lazarus, even if he did die. Certainly, Jesus and his disciples feared the authorities in Jerusalem who had already tried to harm Jesus and definitely wanted to do more to stop him. No doubt it was an agonizing calculation of what could be done and what should be done. No doubt Jesus had to weigh priorities and possibilities. But, for sure, Jesus' thoughts, feelings, and actions were based in deep, deep love.

No doubt all of us, at one time or another, have been in a situation where love caused us to want to do something right now, even if it's wrong. But we also had to factor in our responsibilities to other people, to our jobs, to our debtors, and to our own future. Even when love is an absolute truth, the actions of our love can be complicated by many realities. I guess that's why so often, weeping water is a sign of deep love.

The other day, I came across some song lyrics written by a Czechoslovakian man named Adolf Heyduk in the 1880s. Translated into English, they go like this:

Songs my mother taught me, in the days long vanished;
Seldom from her eyelids were the teardrops banished.
Now I teach my children each melodious measure.
Oft the tears are flowing, oft they flow from my memory's treasure.²

Those are the lyrics and tears of cherished relationships. Weeping water is a sign of deep love.

3—WEEPING WATER IS A SIGN OF HOPEFUL OPPORTUNITY

So, weeping water is a sign of real suffering and of deep love, but that's certainly not all. This story of Jesus and Lazarus also demonstrates to us that weeping water is a sign of hopeful opportunity.

Jesus had a knack for thinking this way. In verse four, when Jesus heard the message that Lazarus was ill, Jesus immediately saw the situation as a hopeful opportunity to demonstrate God's glory and the glory of the Son of Man.

A while later, in verses 14 and 15, Jesus spoke with his disciples about the reality that Lazarus had, in fact, died. But instead of feeling overwhelmed by despair or beating himself up with guilt for not having gone to Bethany sooner, Jesus said to his disciples, "For your sake I'm glad I wasn't there, so that you may believe."

And again, when Jesus encountered Martha, Jesus assured her that her brother would rise again. Jesus was able to see that Martha's painful loss was an opportunity to give her hope by teaching her that Jesus himself was the resurrection and the life and that, by believing in him, Martha, Mary, Lazarus, and everyone could have eternal life.

It's often said that the definition of success isn't a lack of failure or hardship. Those who are successful have often fallen down many, many times before they hit their big winning streak. Successful people are resilient people, who learn from their mistakes, and who don't allow themselves to be defined by their problems or by what other people have thought about them. Jesus was the kind of person who, after falling or bumping into a barrier, could always bounce back up and help others to bounce back up too. How else could Jesus go to this family whom he loved when Jesus knew that the Jewish authorities were looking to harm him? At every step, at every obstacle, Jesus was able to see a hopeful opportunity.

That was true even when Jesus himself was overcome by grief and shed his own tears. In verses 36 and 37, we see that some Jews had gathered around to watch Jesus, to criticize him, and to look for a weakness to exploit. Instead, what they saw in Jesus' tears was his deep love and divine power to overcome even death itself. Somehow, Jesus had the amazing hopefulness and confidence that God would work through him to raise Lazarus from the dead.

In the King James Version of the Bible, John 11:35 is only two words. It's the shortest verse in the Bible: "Jesus wept." But that weeping water wasn't a sign of just sadness and suffering. It wasn't even just a sign of amazing divine love. That weeping water was a sign of the power of optimism. It was a sign of confidence in God's power to sustain and even resurrect life. With its ability to glorify God and Jesus-the-Son-of-Man, the weeping water that fell from Jesus' eyes was a sign of hopeful opportunity.

CONCLUSION

About the time I decided to preach this series of sermons on the living water stories in the Gospel of John, I read about a children's book by Carole Lindstrom called *We Are Water Protectors*. I actually bought the book, and it's beautifully illustrated. Do you remember the protests against the Dakota Access Pipeline on the Standing Rock Indian Reservation that began in 2016? Native American people from all different tribes gathered and camped on that land even in the cold of winter to stop the oil pipeline from crossing the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers. The author tells this story from the perspective of a young Native American girl. Here are some bits from the story.

Water is the first medicine, Nokomis told me. We come from water. It nourished us inside our mother's body, as it nourishes us here on Mother Earth. Water is sacred, [Grandmother] said. . . [But] Now the black snake is here. I must keep the black snake away from my village's water. I must rally my people together. . . It will not be easy . . . Tears like waterfalls stream down . . . my people's faces. . . We are stewards of the Earth. Our spirits have not been broken. We are water protectors. WE STAND!³

Weeping water is a sign of real suffering, of deep love, and of hopeful opportunity. Weeping water is a natural and necessary part of the water of life.

¹ Nov. 30, 2020, <https://catalystmagazine.net/obituary-for-great-salt-lake-even-lakes-are-not-immortal/>

² These lyrics were set to music by Czech composer Antonin Dvorak in 1880.
https://view.newsletters.cnn.com/messages/1630060252149f59b6798740b/raw?utm_term=1630060252149f59b6798740b&utm_source=cnn_Five+Things+for+Friday%2C+August+27%2C+2021&utm_medium=email&bt_ee=cHFgGnPv%2BA08S2UeiRVsgTung%2BHV6%2BYNmlcOSfBv0C%2F0njxA9N4hEvBjQ1BuRfYP&bt_ts=1630060252151

³ Illustrated by Michaela Goade (Roaring Book Press: New York City, 2020).