

Day 40: Sunday, Introduction of Meaning

Making Meaning

“See, the home of God is among mortals. . . he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.”—Revelation 21:3-4

Through his work on the five stages of grief with Kübler-Ross in *On Death and Dying*, Kessler recognized that people reached an unintended finality, a culmination of the grieving process, in the fifth stage. To the five stages, then, Kessler added a sixth: meaning. In this crucial sixth stage, grief transforms into something else, something that gives the grieving an empowering path forward.

In his book *Finding Meaning: The Sixth Stage of Grief*, Kessler illustrates this stage with stories like that of Candy Lightner, who founded Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD). Lightner’s daughter, Cari, was killed by someone who had been repeatedly stopped for drunk driving. Kessler writes that for Lightner, “nothing was worth the cost of losing her daughter, but the ability to create something good from that death helped give her the sense that her daughter’s life as well as her own had meaning.”

Finding meaning in your grief doesn’t have to happen on a scale as large as Lightner’s founding of MADD. Meaning can also be found in small moments, experiences that can be transformed with intention and care to honor the person we are grieving. Kessler illustrates this with the story of a woman, Marcy, who was grieving her deceased father. Her father’s favorite TV personality was Danny Thomas. One day, buying stamps at the post office, she discovered they sold sheets of Forever stamps with Danny Thomas’s image. She bought several sheets and used them to remember her father every time she mailed a letter or paid a bill.

Grief never ends. We will never regain what death has made us lose. We will never stop missing a loved one who has died. But the shape of grief changes. When we find meaning in our grief, that meaning prevents us from getting stuck in our pain and gives us a reason to keep living. It’s one more step on the path of healing from the pain of loss.

Prayer: God, help us transform the emptiness of death into a path of purpose. Help us remember the saints that have gone before us, honoring them with intentionality and a life well lived. Amen.

Teri

Day 41: Monday

Honoring the Gift

“One generation shall extol your works to another and shall declare your mighty acts.”—Psalm 145:4

At my mom’s funeral, numerous people came up to share the exact same sentiment. Oftentimes, these people did not know one another. Even so, the words were the same: “Your mom was such a breath of fresh air.”

This experience so many shared about my mom struck me deeply because those were the exact words I had heard congregants tell me about myself over the years of my pastoral ministry. I don’t share this as a pat on the back because, honestly, for many years I dismissed the congregants’ sentiment, thinking, *Well, yes, I guess a young pastor would bring that kind of energy.*

At the funeral, however, I saw for the first time just how much people notice and value joyful energy as a truly unique gift. And just as powerfully, I saw that this gift was not an accident of my youth. Rather, it was a central trait that God saw fit to pass from my mom to me.

Amid the many seasons of grief over my mom’s death, this awareness brought about my deep gratitude. Because now, when I share the breath-of-fresh-air energy through my life and work, I understand it to be a fundamental way in which I honor and pass along the gift of my mom.

When you consider your loved ones who now stand among the great cloud of witnesses, in what ways did the grace of God flow into your life from them?

What gifts of theirs now come through you?

And what does it feel like to honor one of those gifts today?

Prayer: Gracious God of saints present and eternal, we give you thanks for your faithfulness from one generation to the next. Help us see, claim and live the gifts you have bestowed upon us through those who have gone before us. In Christ's name, Amen.

Bobby

Day 42: Tuesday

Discovering Our Purpose

"We also boast in our afflictions, knowing that affliction produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us."—Romans 5:3-5

I have a friend who had never run a marathon until his wife died of epilepsy. Now he runs them to raise funds to find a cure for epilepsy.

Another friend rarely wrote during his adult years, and then his young son experienced a near-death injury that required months of healing and life-altering circumstances. Now this father has a rapidly growing newsletter, in which he writes regularly and vulnerably about the depths of grief, the surprising joys and the ways to move forward when one's entire paradigm for parenting changes.

I myself carry an old wound from my parent's divorce. I no longer blame them, and I even see how things worked out far better for everyone. The grace of it all amazes me.

Even so, the wound of that break inspired my lifelong mission to facilitate healing and connection, in hopes that people might experience deep belonging across and even amid difference and disagreement. Indeed, one of the great joys in life lies in cultivating and facilitating the space where surprising friendships might emerge or renew.

The point is this: Frequently, the space of our greatest pains is where we discover a deep sense of purpose.

Where has the pain been real for you? How is it quite real today?

And how is God calling you amid this pain?

Prayer: Gracious God, thank you for calling us to follow you. As we experience the hardships, griefs and pains of this lifetime, help us see how you are shaping us through them. Moreover, help us see whether or how this pain calls us into purposeful action for you and your Kingdom's sake. Amen.

Bobby

Day 43: Holy Wednesday

God's Love Is Stronger

"[He] executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and . . . loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing."
—Deuteronomy 10:18

Only twice during the three and a half hours of *Schindler's List* do we glimpse color. The first happens at the outset of the film, as a family lights a candle and offers a Sabbath prayer for peace. Then the candle flickers and goes out. The other time is when Oskar Schindler sees a young girl in a red coat standing outside a Jewish ghetto being cleared by Nazis. Her innocent vulnerability changes Schindler from a man captivated by Nazi power to a man who commits himself to protecting the Jewish people.

The story of *Schindler's List* memorably declares the power of vulnerable love. And it echoes the cross-shaped truth that sits at the heart of our faith, namely, that the love of God is stronger than the worst humanity can do.

And thanks be to God that this love is still on the move.

In 2022, Oliwia Dabrowska was photographed as she stood on the Polish-Ukrainian border helping Ukrainian refugees a month after Russia invaded.

"I can't tell you everything I saw there, because I don't have righ [sic] words in my mind," Dabrowska wrote in a social media post. "Nobody, who have never seen this, can't imagine this nightmare in eyes of those people." At age three, Dabrowska had played the girl wearing the red coat in *Schindler's List*.

When the darkness is real, when the fear rises and the grief grows, perhaps our most essential calling is to give witness that the Gospel is not confined to the past or to cinematic performance. It's a real hope, known most powerfully when it is lived vulnerably among a sea of enemies, children and people simply trying to get home.

Prayer: Loving God, amid the pains, injustices and deep griefs that this world knows, we thank you for remaining faithful. Show us the surprising places in this world and within our hearts where your love is bringing healing and hope this day. And grant us courage that our lives may witness to your love. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Bobby

Day 44: Maundy Thursday

Forward, in Hope and Faith

"Do this in remembrance of me."—1 Corinthians 11:24

Twelve clergy officiated the funeral of my friend Elizabeth, an Episcopal priest. All wore white albs; I was the only Presbyterian in Geneva black. To serve Communion as one of Elizabeth's 12, to offer the bread and cup to those touched by her life, reminded me of my call, and ours.

Gary, her husband, made T-shirts for everyone to wear at the service, showing a big picture of my dear friend on the shirt's front. He chose a photo of Elizabeth, giddy with joy, holding up her second published book, *Irreverent Prayers*.

I took my officiant duties seriously, looking in the eyes of each person who came for Communion, whispering to each the sacrament's words of life, even in the midst of death. "The bread of life. The cup of salvation." Only a few precious souls were left in line when I finally recognized my friend. Elizabeth was in each approaching person: her eyes, her smile, her humor, her passion, her love emanated from the front of each person's tee. It was as if I were serving Elizabeth Communion again and again, her hands outstretched, grasping for the life Christ provides.

When Jesus gathered for one last supper with his chosen 12, he did so to fortify them for the road ahead. Theirs would be a painful road marked with grief. But at the table he reminded them, and us, that we do not travel this road alone. Saints gather at the table with us — those who have finished their journey yet remain here to cheer us on. There is Christ himself, in the bread and the cup, in the Spirit who fills and fortifies us as we partake.

There will be days — perhaps today is one of them — when this journey feels impossible, when death is the loudest force knocking on our door, when no other opportunities feel open to pursue and life itself feels too much to bear.

In such moments Christ calls us to remember.

As I remember Elizabeth, I am called to live and love and serve as she would have, given the choice. As I remember Christ, gathering around the table with his 12, I am called to live with Easter hope. The sun will rise tomorrow. A new day will dawn. This road leads to death, yes, but also to a new life.

Prayer: Fortify us, dear Jesus, for the final days of this Easter journey. The cross of death looms large. Our anticipatory grief is too painful. Guide us forward in hope and faith, remembering that we are an Easter people. Amen.

Teri

Day 45: Good Friday

Leaning into Grief

"Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest."—Matthew 11:28

Holy Week is a good time to lean into our grief.

Years ago, my mentor Rob taught me this lesson. A church member was upset with me over something relatively minor. And boy was she livid! She sent me letters, she sent session letters, and she requested a meeting with the clerk of

session to air her grievances in person. And on what day did she want to meet with the clerk? Good Friday.

I was relatively new to ministry, and I was naturally concerned. I'd upset her, and now she wanted me gone. What to do?

When I shared the situation with Rob, he smiled and shook his head.

"You'll learn," he said, "that over the course of your ministry, during Holy Week, people lean into grief and all its accompanying symptoms: denial, anger, bargaining, etc. You and your parishioners both will be more irritable. Things will feel bigger than they felt last week or will feel next week. This is the effect the liturgical calendar has on us."

In the years since, what Rob said has proven true. The liturgical calendar brings us in touch with those deep feelings that linger at the back of our consciousness. One of the gifts of Holy Week is the chance to express our sorrow and outrage. This is a week to let our grief show.

What are you grieving, in the back of your mind or heart, that you could let come to the forefront this week? Where might the liturgical calendar be taking you this Good Friday?

Whatever you are feeling, today there is room for it. The God who is both crucified Savior and grieving parent is in that space with you. There is rest for your soul.

Prayer: God, in this week of larger-than-life emotions, please take me exactly as I am. Help me remember that you've been here too. Amen.

Ginna

Day 46: Holy Saturday

The Uncomfortable Middle Ground

"May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy."—Psalm 126:5

The work of grief and the work of faith are both about the sacred practice of remembering.

Psalm 126 remembers a time when God brought blessing to God's people and they rejoiced. "May we who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy," the psalmist writes. The people remember that God has been faithful in the past, so they call upon God to be faithful again.

The people's tears are not just an expression of grief; they are an essential piece of God's formula of salvation. In verse 4, the psalmist calls upon God to send rain down to water the soil. But in verse 5, as Southern Methodist University Professor Mark W. Stamm notes in a "Feasting on the Word" commentary, God waters the soil not with rain but with the very tears of God's weeping people.

These are not polite tears. When the rain comes in the Negeb, it is a downpour. We're talking about unstoppable weeping. It comforts me to know that God can make use of an ugly cry.

God uses our tears themselves to water and nourish the seeds we are planting. That is not the same thing as saying that we suffer just so that those seeds can be watered. Rather, God does not let our tears go to waste. Even our tears are water for the soil of what is to come. Even the worst experience can be composted for the good of the Kingdom. The God revealed in Jesus Christ is a God of resurrection.

But that's tomorrow. Today is Holy Saturday, the space between death and resurrection. Today, we sit in the uncomfortable middle ground. We hold space for what was lost. We remember how God brought joy out of tears in the past. And we call upon God, trusting that God can – and will – do it again.

Prayer: God, we weep. Weep with us. Hold us in this space of holy in-between, until the time for joy comes again. Amen.

Ginna

Day 47: Easter Sunday

We Have Life Abundant

"I came that they may have life and have it abundantly."—John 10:10

On July 4, 2015, Elizabeth Acadia was born and placed in the arms of her father, neurosurgeon and author Paul Kalanithi. Holding his newborn while gripping the hand of his wife, Lucy, Kalanithi contemplated his daughter's future: "a blank page on which I would go on."

Eight months later, Kalanithi died of stage-four lung cancer. He was 37 years old. In his book, *When Breath Becomes Air*, Kalanithi recounted the final years of his life, the way his cancer brought clarity to his values and his sense of purpose as a doctor, spouse, father and friend. His trusted oncologist, Emma, frequently offered him wisdom for his journey. When a new growth appeared after a long stretch of his cancer being stable, Paul and Lucy are devastated. To this new setback, Emma responds, "This is not the end, or even the beginning of the end. This is just the end of the beginning."

On this Easter Sunday, as we celebrate the resurrection of Christ our Savior, we praise God for the gift of life after death and for the gift of new life that we can find around every corner of our human journey. It is painful, enraging, depressing to face our mortality and that of those we love. But death also illumines the meaning to be found in God's gift of abundant life.

In a final letter to his baby girl, Paul wrote:

When you come to one of the many moments in life where you must give an account of yourself, provide a ledger of what you have been, and done, and meant to the world, do not, I pray, discount that you filled a dying man's days with a sated joy, a joy unknown to me in all my prior years, a joy that does not hunger for more and more but rests, satisfied.

This Easter, let us not discount our lives, the joy we offer others, the joy others offer us, the gift we have to live, breathe and believe. We have life. By the grace of God, we have life abundant.

Prayer: To our God of resurrection, of life-giving abundance, of today's joy and tomorrow's hope, be all honor and glory and thanksgiving and power, now and forevermore. Amen.

Teri