

Waves of Grief  
Fourth Sunday of Lent - Year A - 03/15/2020  
Psalm Reading: 107:23-32  
1<sup>st</sup> Reading: Job 2:11-13, 2<sup>nd</sup>: 2 Cor. 1:3-7

If we live long enough we will experience grief, we will experience loss, mental suffering, anguish so intense that we will feel overwhelmed by its magnitude. Grief comes when we lose someone or even some thing that had become precious to us, so precious that it was an essential part of daily life, and then suddenly the essential is gone, and there is no getting this vital part back. It is as if a piece of our self has been ripped from us.

Gordon sent me an email a couple of months ago that set me to reflecting on the nature of grief. The email contained the text of a Reddit post where the author wrote of how grief does not hit us simply in one massive blast, but comes on in waves. And I thought about the truth of this. It certainly reflects my experience of both grief and waves.

It was back in the mid-1980s, and I was a young Officer of the Deck. I was on the bridge for the mid-watch, a four hour period from mid-night to four in the morning (2400-0400 hours). The *USS Raleigh* was returning to Norfolk, Virginia from training exercises in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. It had been hard but rewarding work. We felt that we had trained to peak efficiency and were ready for almost anything. We were steaming northeast at about 18 knots and not too far off the coast of North Carolina, approaching Cape Hatteras.

The hubris with which we steamed over the waters is kind of like the way we just go through our lives. Life just chugs forward, when things are good, we think we are in control and that we will always steam calmly through the waters. We don't really pay attention to the wide ocean around us, we can look out upon it and see how vast it is, with no land in any direction. We can intellectually know its power ... the ship I was on, the *USS Raleigh*, weighed over 14,000 tons and carried on board nearly 400 souls. It was a mere speck on the ocean's surface. The truth is, the crew on board the *Raleigh* did not truly comprehend the ocean's power until we experience that power first hand.

Our responsorial psalm speaks of ancient sailors on ancient waters, experiencing what I experienced on that mid-watch so long ago. The reading begins...

*Some went out on the sea in ships, they were merchants on the mighty waters. They saw the works of the Lord.*

And yes, being out on the ocean on a powerful ship gives sailors an illusion of control. You mark out a course, you follow the lines you have drawn on a map, tracking your progress on a nautical chart with the firm belief that everything is going to work out as you have planned. And don't we plan our lives out in this way? Cruising along, expecting the sea conditions will remain the same and we will go about our business and reach port on time and in good condition. We don't take into account the works of the Lord, the wide ocean. We only see the flat horizon and the wide open skies above. But for our sailors in the psalm the works of the Lord grew into something they were not expecting. The works became something much greater than

merely the placid waters of the sea. Our psalm reading tells us that they saw “[God’s] *wonderful deeds in the deep, for [God] spoke and stirred up a tempest that lifted high the waves.*”

Just like that [snap] tragic events may come upon us bringing with them panic and grief. It can be like the squall of a sudden storm, or it can build, one wave piling on top of another. In an instant we might lose a loved one in a freak accident, or it may come as a prolonged slow moving disaster.

Then when we are assailed by tragedy, when the fateful day comes, we often sink into a state of shock, and it is then that grief begins to assail us, one relentless wave at a time.

As I was on the mid-watch that fateful night, the Navigator had delivered a weather report to the bridge. I looked it over when I came on watch, reading that there might be troubled waters ahead: rain squalls and mounting seas, it didn’t look like there would be anything happening that I had not seen before. But something different was coming. It would be something like the understated line we get in our responsorial psalm “*God spoke and stirred up a tempest that lifted high the waves.*”

And this was exactly what happened, there was a rain squall on the horizon, dead ahead of us, lightning flashed and the waves got bigger and bigger. By the time we got to the rain, I realized, that this was more than a squall, it was a full blown storm. The wind was blowing hard whistling through the rigging on the signal mast. The ship began pitching forward (that is a rising up to a crest and then crashing down, nose first as the wave passes away beneath the keel of the ship) and rocking back as it steamed into each wave. We were driving right into them. When the pitching began, the captain appeared on the

bridge coming silently into the space, announced in low respectful tones by the bosun of the watch..."Captain on the Bridge." He sat in his chair prominently positioned on the starboard side near the helm. He grimly ordered all the hatches and doorways be battened down, and the men were roused from their sleep to secure the ship.

That night as the *Raleigh* beat its way around Hatteras the waves stacked higher and higher. The horizon disappeared and with the driving rain, even the air seemed to be made of smothering seawater. The waves became water mountains, and over time when the ship drove into one it seemed as if the whole ship became engulfed. Yet all the while it continued to move toward the crest. The wall of water bashed at our windscreens as we climbed. And so our anxiety rose as well. I remember looking over at the captain. Even this confident man, veteran of a hundred sea voyages, felt the anxiety and tension. His knuckles were white as he gripped the arms of his chair.

So, like *Raleigh* at midnight, battered by wave after wave, in the midst of disaster, we can become overwhelmed by waves of grief. We feel helpless in the face of its power. We wonder what might happen should the craft go broadside to the waves. Yes, that is the time when the danger is greatest in a storm at sea, when the ship stops driving through the storm, when it completely capitulates, when the waves come at it from the starboard or the port and it flips onto its side...and is crushed by the next wave.

Our psalm says of the sailors, "*They mounted up to the heavens, and went down to the depths; in their peril their courage melted away.*"

*They reeled and staggered like drunkards; they were at their wits' end.*

*Then they cried out to the Lord in their trouble..."*

No doubt on that dark night the whole ship was filled with anxiety, from the captain right down to the mess cooks, and more than one prayer was raised up to heaven begging God to get us through this merciless storm. I raised up my own little prayer, and I heard the Junior officer of the watch who was gripping the radar console say a few words to the almighty for himself and for his shipmates. It was no time to be an atheist when the power of God's creation was so manifest.

Then I noticed the wind seemed to splatter the windshield from a different direction, I ordered the helmsman to bring us to a new bearing slightly to port and we continued to drive on into the teeth of the storm. The gut wrenching pitching continued. The fear and the anxiety raised to a fever pitch, but every man on the bridge held steady to his job, the ship did not waver, did not broach to.

And Psalm 107 tells us that after the sailors had cried out to the Lord in their trouble, that the Lord "*brought them out of their distress.*"

Yes, at four in the morning the ship was still pitching, but the movement had noticeably diminished. I went below and saw that some stores had broken loose. The bulkheads had been battered. Havoc reigned inside of the ship. It was a mess internally, just as grief can make us a mess. We may seem fine on the exterior, but beneath we are confused, sad, lonely, seemingly unable to comprehend the disaster that befell us...but already crewmen were fastening down the furniture,

were containing the chaos, were returning the ship to the orderly environment we had always known. Though order would return, the dents and bruises would remain.

When I had ensured the security of my spaces, I fell into my rack and went almost immediately to sleep. I was relieved that we had staid the course and gotten through the deeply troubled waters. Yet the anxiety remained despite the diminishing waves. And so it is with grief, even when the storm of disaster seems to have abated, the waves of grief still come. Yes, it may be longer between the swells, they may not be as high, but still they come, and in fact the waves never really cease. They occasionally well up in our minds sometimes rising up at unexpected moments, a freak wave in a calm sea. And through it all we receive some comfort and solace through prayer, through our relationships with God and with each other.

Then our psalm records:

*“[God] stilled the storm to a whisper; the waves of the sea were hushed. They were glad when it grew calm, and he guided them to their desired haven.”*

And so we learn that there is an end to this voyage that we call life, we come home to a haven, a heaven, a port where the sea does not encroach with its powerful waves. Yet, in that new abode, next to the shore, we can climb to the crest of hill and look out on the solid shore, and though we might ultimately find peace on the shore, we can see the waves buffeting the shore. We can recall the loss, and the waves and feel that longing for what is lost. We call this grief. And we can take comfort now, that ultimately, in this port, this haven, in the

arms of God, what was lost to us out on that sea will be restored to us. Our relationships with each other will be made whole once again, and we all will commune together with our Triune God.

Now let us pray together...

Blessed God, be with us and bring us comfort in times when we are grieving. Take away our regrets, but do not take all our grief away for it is one way we remember those whom we have loved. We can stand the little waves of grief as we sail on through this world. Keep us secure from the big waves, keep us safe from anxiety, and when the end does come, bring us all home to be together with you, God. This we pray through Jesus Christ our Lord.

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