

ROAR: From Grief to Glory

Psalm 34:18
Philippians 4:4-7
Romans 5:1-5

When life is sad, God is good!

A sermon preached by
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First United Methodist Church
Fort Smith, Arkansas
June 9, 2019

When I graduated college umpteen years ago. I knew God was calling me into full-time ordained pastoral ministry. I went straight to seminary for a year, then I took a year to pastor two small churches in Oppelo and Houston, Arkansas. (I like to say that my first appointment was to the largest Methodist church in Houston, but it was Houston, Arkansas.) I was not fully trained at that point, but I was fully responsible as the pastor of those two congregations. Everything went pretty smoothly, until the week after Christmas. Then Hazel Brown died. She had been sick a long time, and it was not unexpected. But I had never done a funeral before. I had only been to a couple of funerals in my life! I consulted with my supervising pastor, and he gave me some advice about what to do and some resources to look at.

I breathed a little easier for 48 hours, until I got a call that Leon Thompson had died. Leon was a pillar of the church and was recuperating from a heart attack. He was doing fine, but he threw a blood clot and passed away suddenly. I was still kind of reeling from that when the phone rang the next day, and Catherine Van Marion had died. I remember hanging up the phone (because that's what you did with a phone back then) and gazing up to heaven and saying out loud, "What are you trying to do, run me off?" Of course, it was all about me.

So the first week of January, I held my first three funerals in four days. And I survived. I began to feel a deep resonance with the kind of ministry I could provide to grieving families. When I went back to seminary that fall, I made sure that I took a course in pastoral care, because I knew that was going to be a big part of my ministry. I read a book in that course called *Good Grief* by Granger Westberg, which was a pioneering book at the time about dealing with grief.¹ I still give that little book to families when they have a death.

One of the key concepts that I learned all those years ago and continue to have reinforced almost daily is that life is full of grief experiences. We experience the pain of grief in more ways than losing a loved one to death. Any experience of loss brings some form of grief. Debilitating illness, divorce, loss of a job, kids leaving home, moving to a new town, natural

disasters—all these and more cause us to experience the sadness, heartbreak, and depression of grief.

The flooding in our town and all along the Arkansas River is an emotional disaster as much as it is a physical disaster. People who were flooded and friends of people who were flooded are devastated emotionally because they lost valuable property. But more than that, their security was violated, and their control over their environment was shattered. Sure, they and we can all be thankful for what didn't happen—nobody was hurt or killed except a few who violated safety precautions. But there is nevertheless a grief process to work through. One of the ways that pastors and counselors and UMCOR and the Red Cross are going to be helping in the weeks ahead is to provide mental health resources in the River Valley for those who have experienced these losses.

For the last four weeks, we have been sharing in our sermons the Bible lessons from our Vacation Bible School curriculum, which the kids will start tomorrow. At first, I thought this might be a little light-hearted and fun to put ourselves in the Vacation Bible School mood, but it has turned out to be extremely relevant material for what we all have been through the last few weeks. The overall theme of Vacation Bible School is, “When life is wild, God is good,” and it has been a wild ride here lately. The weekend the tornados hit Fort Smith, our theme was, “When life is unfair, God is good.” The next week, when the floodwaters were rising, we said, “When life is scary, God is good.” The next week, when several hundred homes in Fort Smith were underwater, we said, “When life changes, God is good.” And now that we are beginning to deal with the aftermath of the flood, we are saying, “When life is sad, God is good.” What began as a series of children's messages has been good for all of us, no matter what age we are.

Make no mistake. Children experience the griefs of life, too. Maybe they can't or don't articulate it as much as adults, but the feelings are still there. They suffer when disasters strike, too, or when their parents split up, or when they have to move. So they need this word next week, too. But it's a word to all of us today. Sometimes the message to the children is the best message of all.

One of the best books of my childhood was *Where the Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak.² It won many awards and has been a staple of children's literature for over fifty years. It tells the story of Max, who is sent to bed without his supper for being so wild. He takes an imaginary journey to the land of wild things and becomes the king of the wild things. All the creatures on the island have a wild rumpus, but when the rumpus is over, Max gets lonely for someone who loves him. So he returns to his room to find a nice hot dinner waiting on him.

In the film version of the book, just made in 2009, they added some material to make it a feature-length production. When Max establishes himself as the king of all the wild things, the creatures come to believe that Max has been sent to abolish suffering in their world and to establish permanent peace and happiness (sort of a Messiah-figure, if you will). So they ask him: "Will you keep out all the sadness?" Still acting his role as king and miracle worker, Max declares with bravado, "I have a sadness shield that keeps out all the sadness, and it's big enough for all of us."³

Wouldn't it be great if we all had a big sadness shield to protect us from the griefs we experience day by day, week, by week, year by year throughout our lives? I can't offer that. Sad times will happen. Griefs will come. But when they do, we have a resource to cope with all of it. We can still depend on the goodness of God. The key verse for the children on Thursday will be Psalm 34:18: "*The Lord is near to the brokenhearted, and saves the crushed in spirit.*" That is an affirmation that we can make without apology or hesitation. When life is sad, God is good.

But what does that mean, to proclaim the goodness of God in the face of sadness and grief? How can we find the goodness of God in this junkyard of trouble and broken hearts? I think we find goodness at least three ways.

When life is sad, God gives us peace. There is a spiritual and emotional peace that comes to us even when the blows of life have been hard and frequent. I had one of our flooded members tell me that when he looked at his house up to the eaves underwater, he said, "I just felt a peace about it all. I knew everything was going to be OK."

Peace is the promise of our faith. On the night before Jesus died, the disciples were at about a 12 on a 10-point anxiety scale, and Jesus told them,

*“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”*⁴ The great promise from Paul’s Letter to the Philippians we read a moment ago: *“And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”*⁵

When we are suffering the pain, anxiety, and fear of grief, God sends us a peace that is beyond rationality and sense. It’s just there. The first time I heard about this peace was in college when I was taking a religion course with Dr. Bob Goodloe at Hendrix College. We were talking about religious experience, and I had had some, but never in relation to grief. Frankly, at the time I wasn’t sure that Dr. Goodloe had ever had any personal religious experience. He seemed to talk about religion mostly from a detached and objective viewpoint. But one day he shared about his father, who was a retired professor at Perkins School of Theology in Dallas. Dr. Goodloe, Sr., died in 1966. Bob, Jr., was just devastated and felt empty through the days following his father’s death and even through the funeral. But after the funeral, as he was walking away from the magnificent Highland Park Methodist Church and across the SMU campus, he said he felt it. The sense of peace overwhelmed him. Suddenly he experienced the reality of God; he knew his dad was OK; he found the peace that passes all understanding. I’ll never forget that personal testimony.

Peace happens when life is sad, because God is good.

When life is sad, God restores our joy. This doesn’t mean that grief doesn’t affect us emotionally or that we can just keep a stiff upper lip and move on like nothing happened. That is unhelpful at best and delusional at worst. Grief hurts, and we don’t get over a major loss in life overnight. But eventually joy does return. We laugh again. Life may never be the same after a loss, but that doesn’t mean that life will never be good again.

Again, the Psalmist speaks the words we need to hear: *“Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning. ... You have turned my mourning into dancing; you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy.”*⁶ Or Paul makes this promise in the Scripture we read: *“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. ... Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let*

your requests be made known to God.”⁷ The joy of the Lord is our strength, and after life deals us a blow, God brings us back to joy.

My most personal acquaintance with this return to joy was my mother after my father died. He died at the age of 63, and she was just 62. (I didn’t realize at the time how young she was!) My mom and dad were pretty much inseparable. They worked together, played together, and retired together. She was by his side constantly when he got sick, and she was with him when he died. I didn’t think she was going to make it through the grief. It took a while, about two years, before she decided she was going to have a life after my dad. But then she had a great life for over twenty more years. She was involved in her church and her community; she was a lay member to the Annual Conference and a big wig in the United Methodist women. She and her sister traveled all over. She loved my dad until the day she died, but she told me many times, “Why, Bud, I just couldn’t sit on my butt at home forever!”

When life is sad, we can live in hope. This may be the best promise of all, because even before grief strikes us, and certainly in the midst of all the pain, we are people of hope. We know who’s got this. We know the outcome of our suffering. Paul writes to the Romans this incredible word: *“Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.”*⁸ If that doesn’t thrill your heart, check your pulse!

We live in hope right now because we know that our griefs are producing something better in us—endurance, character, and hope. *“We know that in all things God works for good”*⁹—which doesn’t mean that all things are good—floods bad, tornadoes bad, cancer bad—or that our experiences of grief are painless—they aren’t. But *“we do not grieve as those who have no hope.”*¹⁰ We know and have faith that we will come through our griefs in a good way now, and beyond this life, God has a better place, an eternal

hope, a glorious life waiting for all God's faithful people. We know, as Paul says, that "*the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us.*"¹¹ We know that because Jesus the Son of God died and rose again to redeem us and all creation. It's written all over Scripture.

The Bible story the children will use this week to get at the notion of grief and hope is the death and resurrection of Jesus. I have always had a hard time talking with children about the death of Jesus; there's just no way to do it without being sad and depressing and scary. Maybe I should go to class Thursday and see how our teachers do it. But the death of Jesus has to be the Great Sadness. Can you imagine a greater grief than God's at the crucifixion of God's own Son? The grief of a Father, the injustice done to a man who was Love Incarnate, the sadness of his followers who had hoped for so much more—it was just heartbreaking.

But three days later, by the power of God, Jesus rose from the dead. Grief turned to glory. Defeat turned to victory. Anxiety turned to peace. Sadness turned to joy. And despair turned to hope. The death and resurrection of Jesus is the best example ever of the goodness of God.

We live in a world full of sadness. Grievs abound in a hundred different forms. But the resurrection faith in a risen Lord tells us that the pain is temporary. Evil and injustice will not win the day. How we respond makes a difference. The hard times can become opportunities for learning and growth and service. In the midst of the bad news of life, we have this Good News: When life is sad, God gives us peace. When life is sad, God restores our joy. When life is sad, we can live in hope. When life is sad, God is good—all the time!

¹ Granger Westberg, *Good Grief: Anniversary Edition* (Fortress Press, 2010).

² Maurice Sendak, *Where The Wild Things Are* (New York: Harper Collins reprint edition, 1984).

³ Spike Jonze and Dave Eggars, *Where The Wild Things Are* (Warner Bros., Legendary Entertainment, Village Roadshow Pictures, 2009), and Joseph Laconte, *The Searchers* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2012), 35-36.

⁴ John 14:27.

⁵ Philippians 4:7.

⁶ Psalm 30:5, 11.

⁷ Philippians 4:4, 6.

⁸ Romans 5:1-5.

⁹ Romans 8:28.

¹⁰ I Thessalonians 4:13.

¹¹ Romans 8:18.