

The Water Withdrew: Triggers of Hope

John 11:17-27, Revelation 21:1-7

The water withdrew, exposing the sea bottom, the sand and the coral. For a second, it stood poised—a wall of water before their very eyes. And then, the fifteen-metre wave pummelled the coastline.

The two of them, both journalists, had just stepped outside. The earth had quaked two hours before, but nothing had been damaged. They were looking at the sea, tying their shoes, when the water withdrew. They watched the tsunami return. Their house was struck first. They can recall the sound of splintering wood and the sight of their car being swept away in a torrent of water.

The tsunami swept the couple inland, striking trees and buildings, ripping their legs and arms open with several gashes. They survived, but nothing of their home remained. They found their refrigerator bobbing out at sea.

The death toll in Asia continues to climb. Disease and lack of clean drinking water are the torrents that continue to ravish the land—the tsunami's second and third (and fourth) wave. Watching the news this past month, my stomach turned and heart ached, just as it did after September 11th, but I wonder how many people have already forgotten what took place only a month ago. There are few tears being wiped from the eyes of the survivors, and they're still burying their dead, their loved ones, in mass graves three hectares in size.

On this morning of epiphany, during the season in which we celebrate the light of Christ, I wanted so much to start this message with a light-hearted story, perhaps even a joke or two. (I've always wanted to be funny). But the stories of this past month don't lend themselves well to humour, and I'm not sure we can avoid the stories altogether. The tears of suffering are the backdrop to the words, "I am making everything new!"¹

After Jesus' birth and well into his ministry, Mary approached Jesus and poured perfume on him and wiped his feet with her hair. This same Mary, together with her sister Martha, came to Jesus a little while later to tell him of their brother's death.² Lazarus was dead, dragged out to sea by a different kind of tsunami. Mary and Martha mourned his death. The tears flowed, and they pleaded with their Lord, saying, "We know that even now God will give you whatever you ask."³

Jesus responded by saying, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live."⁴ When he saw the tears well up in Mary's eyes, he was deeply moved. And the shortest verse in scripture records a most powerful event: Jesus wept.

His tears of suffering, of compassion, fell for those he loved, for those who loved him, even though he knew full well that the tears would come to an end. That was the whole reason he came to be with us. At one point, he even warned his loved ones and his disciples not to be alarmed by the coming suffering, the wars, the tsunamis.⁵ He knew there would be wars and rumours of wars, famines and earthquakes, and that these would be but birth pains of a more wonderful coming—a day in which the water, the water of our tears, would be withdrawn. Even

¹ Revelation 21:5.

² John 11:2.

³ John 11:22.

⁴ John 11:25,

⁵ Matthew 24:6.

this month's horrific events in Asia are signs, triggers of hope, for a coming kingdom.

I spoke recently with someone who lived through World War II. As a young man, he entered the army and resisted the German occupation. Before long, he was crammed into a boxcar—one of several thousand prisoners of war. The boxcar was locked from the outside; there was no water, no room to move, fear. At the camp, he was forced to watch the torture of other prisoners of war; they were forced to walk and kneel on hot coals. He survived. He was part of the underground resistance. He was in Amsterdam when the war ended. It was the winter of hunger that nearly killed him.

There are times when I wonder if we, as North Americans, have forgotten, forgotten what it's like to witness suffering firsthand, never having known what it means to really suffer ourselves. Few of us remember any major wars or famines; I'd imagine none of us have seen a tsunami. We watch it on T.V. as if it's entertainment; we distance ourselves from the suffering; we sentence it to the sidelines of our worship, imprison the stories in the confines of our history classes. Today's happy, go-lucky, you-want-it-you-got-it world has almost all but erased the nature of suffering from its consciousness. We're tempted, again and again, to dress our lives up and preach nice, simple, pretty sermons.

But I've heard some of our stories. Some are broadcast on the evening news; others never make it beyond the confines of our front doors. The passage we read from the book of Revelation is a passage of hope, and, as Paul notes, we never hope for what we already have. We hope for what we do not yet have.⁶

I've heard some of our stories. We may not have been prisoners of war or been swept away by a tsunami, but we have lived through the silence of depression. We've walked around at recess, alone on the playground of life. We've been dealing with the guilt associated with cheating on a spouse, with addictions to work and everything beyond. We've lost loved ones in house fires and had to explain death to six year olds. We've felt the pressures of wanting to fit in, of having to present ourselves in just the right image. Tears of suffering are our floodwaters.

During the Christmas season, we celebrated Christ's birth. In his birth, the floodwaters of heaven poured out upon us drops of grace—a reversal of the flood that destroyed the earth in the days of Noah, a reversal of our own floodwaters. It's upon the floodwaters of grace that we are carried, that we are given life, breath, purpose, meaning, each other.

And yet, our tears are not yet dry. They continue to be mixed with the floodwaters of grace. Tears of suffering mixed with drops of grace equal compassion. Jesus wept; he weeps for us, with us. Our suffering may not be as great as what's being experienced in Asia or what was experienced in Hitler's concentration camps, but there are still wellsprings of suffering within us—tsunamis brewing deep within—and they, too, are birth pains of a coming kingdom.⁷

A number of years ago, I had to read the Bible from the beginning to the end, from the Alpha to the Omega. It was a class assignment, but it quickly took on the form of a personal journey. Unlike the Bible Marathon posted on Jubilee's website, this journey followed the story exactly as it unfolds in scripture, from Genesis to Revelation; and yes, Leviticus bored me to tears.

Scripture's story is one of sin and suffering—a story filled with ravished lands, famine-stricken people, and exile from a promised land. It's a story that in some ways mirrors my own and, hazarding a guess, it mirrors yours as well.

It was late at night when I approached the final chapters of Revelation. I was sitting on

⁶ Romans 8:24-25.

⁷ Romans 8:22.

our rather large window ledge, reading by a dim light in our bedroom. Elaine, my wife, was sleeping. I remember feeling overwhelmed, deeply moved. No novel had ever overwhelmed me in the same way. I caught a glimpse of the groaning of creation, as if in childbirth; I caught a glimpse of how many tears God has shed over us; I caught a glimpse of all the times I had walked away from him, often slamming the door in his face; I caught a glimpse of the floodwaters of grace that push back the tears of suffering.

“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea.”⁸

There was no longer any sea—no tsunamis, nothing unknown, nothing evil, no suffering. The sea encapsulates all of these. In the chaos of the beginning, in the opening chapters of Genesis, the Spirit had hovered over the sea; she hovered over the unknown.⁹ Chased by the Egyptians, the Israelites had been confronted by the expanse of the Red Sea; they were confronted by the depth of their own sinfulness and brought through it by the grace of God¹⁰. Unwilling to go to Ninevah, Jonah had been tossed overboard into the sea; he fell into the depths of suffering, spit out in an act of grace.¹¹ On that day, when the floodwaters of grace make all things new, the sea will be no more. The water will be withdrawn, and it won't be poised to pummel the coastline, as it was this past month.

In its place will be the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband—Christ. Throughout the New Testament, the church, despite its arrogance and its desperate stranglehold on the truth—the church is considered to be a bride for her Saviour and King. The New Jerusalem, the coming kingdom of God, is the rising, forgiven church of which you and I are a part. And the Lord will dwell with us, walk with us, eat with us.

You and I are not headed to some cloud-filled place up in the sky. God's making this place his place. The whole earth is being made new, and, on this earth, Christ will be with his bride, and, as Isaiah notes, we will be called Sought After, the City No Longer Deserted by God.¹²

“I am the resurrection and the life.” Jesus stood before the tomb in which Lazarus was buried. Mary and Martha were there. Jesus turned his face to the heavens and instructed Lazarus to come out, to get up and walk, to take off the clothes of death, of suffering, of loss and go. He wiped away the tears from their eyes, so that they might believe, so that they might get a foretaste of what lies ahead. He who believes in me will live; I will give you what you do not yet have.

We pray for that day to come, “Come, come Lord Jesus.” It's a prayer of sheer desperation, a pain-filled crying out at the time of childbirth. If we try to erase the suffering, the loss, the sorrow, our fear, if we try to cover it up, we weaken the prayer, almost to point of silence. If we have everything we need, if our houses are full, if our lives have no empty corners, if our questions are all simple answers, if our philosophies are stricken with unfounded optimism, then we cannot have hope, for we can only hope for what we do not yet have. Hope requires desperation. “Come, come Lord Jesus.”

It's the season of epiphany—a season in which we're struck by the grace of Christ, the grace of one who dwells with us. It's a season of overwhelming hope, hope for things to come—a day in which we celebrate the coming kingdom, a kingdom we see only in part. Yes, the dwelling place of God is already with us; yes, he is carrying us upon the floodwaters of his grace;

⁸ Revelation 21:1.

⁹ Genesis 1:2.

¹⁰ Exodus 14:22.

¹¹ Jonah 2:10.

¹² Isaiah 62:12.

yes, we are being nourished by the water of life, but our tears are still being mixed with his. They still return from time to time.

But we are not just stuck here waiting; we are not just crying out. Today is a day of hope, of eye-opening epiphany; it's a day of dreaming out loud at high volume, imagining a world better than this.¹³ "I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband."¹⁴ Our God is preparing us to meet his Son, and we are, almost silently, reminded that it's not about what we do, but about allowing God to prepare us to meet our Lord. Yes, there's work to be done in his kingdom; and no, you can't just sit on your butt, but, on this day, we're reminded to allow God to work in us, to prepare our hearts, to offer us his word of hope. Perhaps our New Year's resolution should have been this: Allow God to prepare you for Christ.

As I sat on the window ledge late that night, I read the words, "He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."¹⁵ And sitting there, I caught a glimpse of the hope that's etched into the story, carved into my very being. All the tears will be wiped from our eyes—the water will be withdrawn, never to return, never to pummel our coastlines again.

¹³ Bono, quote from U2 concert, (Point Theatre: Dublin), 2000.

¹⁴ Revelation 21:2.

¹⁵ Revelation 21:4.