

Sermon for March 26, 2023
St. Alban's Episcopal Church, Austin TX
The Reverend Bradley Hauff, guest preacher

It's a pleasure to be with you all. I'm Bradley Hauff. My last name is spelled H-A-U-F-F. H as in hotel, A as in alpha, U as in uniform, and two Fs as in my high school report card. Just kidding! I am the Missioner for Indigenous Ministries for the Episcopal Church and a member of the Oglala Lakota Oyate, the Oglala Sioux Tribe of South Dakota. I greet you with the Lakota words, hihanni waste', good morning. Repeat after me. I'm in town this weekend because I'm giving a lecture at the Seminary of the Southwest tomorrow, and in the meantime I wanted to say "hi" to Peggy Lo, your rector, whom I've known for a number of years during her association with Asiamerica Ministries which is another of the ethnic offices in The Episcopal Church. Good to be with you this morning, Peggy, and with all of you.

We are in the last days of the season of Lent. Holy Week starts with Palm Sunday next weekend. Lent has given us an opportunity to look within, to honestly examine ourselves – good, bad and ugly and

everything in between. This is important to do, not just at certain times of the year, necessarily, but on an ongoing basis. When we do this, we see ourselves for who we really are and not as an illusion. At times we are strong. At times we are weak. At times we flourish. At times we are broken. Lent is a special opportunity to look at the tough times, the weaknesses, the brokenness. The things about us that we don't want to see or acknowledge. When we do this, we are introduced to ourselves, and we are introduced to God and how God works in our lives.

I'd like to focus on two of the readings we just heard – from John's Gospel and from Ezekiel. In John, Jesus's friend Lazarus dies, and four days later is raised from the tomb. In Ezekiel, dry bones are restored to human flesh and with bodies that have come alive again. These are stories of resurrection and God's unimaginable power. They are celebrations. But before the celebration comes the pain. Let's start by looking at Jesus, and how he weeps.

“Jesus began to weep.” One of the shortest, perhaps the shortest verse in the whole Bible. Also, one of the most powerful. It shows us how vulnerable, how broken, how human Jesus was. He wasn’t afraid to go there. He wasn’t afraid to weep, and weep in front of others.

The weeping of tears. At some point all of us get there. We don’t necessarily want to go there, but there are times when we just can’t help it. We cry. It’s one of the things that makes us human. Just like Jesus.

You may already know this, but not all tears are the same. There are three different types of tears shed by human beings: basal tears, reflex tears and psychic tears. These three types of tears are triggered differently in the brain and they have different chemical compositions.

Basal tears provide constant lubrication for the eyes so they don’t dry out. Without basal tears our eyes would be like two prunes in our eye sockets. So thank God for basal tears.

Reflex tears repel irritants (such as vapors from chopping onions) and foreign objects (like dirt or eyelashes) from the eyes. If you wear contact lenses, you're probably very well acquainted with reflex tears. With contacts, even the smallest particle of dust or ink can feel like a whole pine tree in your eye. Thank God for reflex tears.

Psychic tears are triggered by the part of the brain that manages emotions. They are also referred to as emotional tears. We have to be deeply emotionally affected to cry these tears. They contain a natural painkiller that the body releases to reduce stress and help us to feel better. That's why we feel good after we have a long weepy cry. These tears are transforming and healing.

Jesus wept emotional tears. And what happens after Jesus weeps? Lazarus is restored to life. Transformed. Transformed as much as anyone can experience. From weakness to strength. From brokenness to restoration. From death to life. Weeping before rejoicing.

Let's look at Ezekiel, the 37th chapter.

"Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. ¹³And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. ¹⁴I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act," says the Lord."

As a messenger of God, Ezekiel was called to prophecy in some very unique ways. In the first part of the book of Ezekiel, Israel has been disobedient and unfaithful to God. And God instructs Ezekiel to outwardly demonstrate what was going to happen to Jerusalem as a result. Jerusalem was about to be sacked, and the people taken into exile. So God told Ezekiel to act this out by creating a model of the city and lying before it, for a length of time that would symbolize their captivity – lying on one side of his body for 390 days, representing the

number of years the Kingdom of Israel would be in exile, and then rolling over to the other side of his body, lying there for 40 days, representing the number of years the Kingdom of Judah would be in exile. God held his body in place during that time so Ezekiel wouldn't shift sides in the process. Can you imagine that? Lying on just one side of your body for over a year? How agonizing. And Ezekiel wasn't lying on a cushy memory foam adjustable mattress either. This is the kind of stuff that happens in prisoner of war camps. That's why Ezekiel endured this – to show the people of Israel a prophecy of their future, horrible as it would be. And Ezekiel wept in the process. Many times he wept. Psychic tears. We don't see it in today's passage, in chapter 37, but previously, God says to Ezekiel in chapter 21: "Cry and wail, son of man; for it is on my people. It is on all the princes of Israel. They are delivered over to the sword with my people."

Ezekiel wept.

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When I think of psychic tears, I think of my dad. His name was Sylvan. He was a survivor of a federal government residential school in South Dakota. He was sent to live at that school at age five and lived there until he was eighteen. Almost his entire childhood and adolescence. He didn't understand what was happening. He didn't know that he was being introduced to the horrors of enforced assimilation from Native American culture and family life into the unkind realities of the dominant American culture. He didn't understand that the essence of who he was as an Indigenous child was being taken from him, along with his parents, his family. But there was one thing he did understand – tears. Weeping. Like all the Indigenous children who were raised in residential schools, he did a lot of it. He told me that, after he was taken to the school, every evening after supper he would walk down to the front gate and wait. “I would wait,” he said, “for someone to come and take me home.” He said he did this for about a year. And eventually he had to face to fact that whoever he was waiting for wasn't coming. And then he began to weep. He wept

every night into his pillow so no one would hear him, as did many Indigenous children. Tears became his only friend. And best friend. Because they gave him release. They gave him strength. They gave him resilience. And when he wept, he said he believed that Jesus was there with him. Weeping the same kind of tears. The end result – he was able to adjust. He made it through the school. Graduated top of his class. Went on to college and a successful career. And passed away two years ago at the age of 90. He taught me a lot. I wouldn't be standing here right now talking to you without him. Sylvan's tears helped transform his life, and impacted me as his son.

Our world is weeping today. In Ukraine. In Sudan and Somalia. In California, Washington DC, Mississippi, Austin Texas. Our world is weeping today – the same type of tears as Sylvan. The same type of tears as Ezekiel. The same type of tears as Jesus.

Don't be afraid to cry. In many ways it's our only hope.

Today's readings give us a glimpse of what is just around the corner for us in our seasonal church calendar – Easter.

Resurrection. But before we can experience the glories and joys of resurrection, we must experience death. You can't have one without the other. They are opposites, death and resurrection, and so they define one another. The message of these stories, and it is a truthful message, is that God is a God of transformation. God is with us even when we are at our lowest and have given up hope. Where there is no hope there is God, still there. Ezekiel and the people of Israel experienced this. Lazarus, Mary and Martha experienced this. And we experience it too, through our encounter with Jesus in our own lives. Remember when we weep, we weep with Jesus, and Jesus weeps with us.