

Powered by Jesus for loss

By Tara Edelschick
Charles River Church
September 24, 2006



Charles River Church
Powered by God for life.

Last Sunday, Will asked us about our power source. He asked us to reflect throughout the week about the place from which we derive our power. If your week went anything like mine did, you found the reflection disturbing. It's not that I didn't turn to God for help. I did – all the time, actually:

I think I hate my two year old – I need you Lord!

I can't stop bickering with Jeff – Help me, Jesus!

I have nothing worth saying on Sunday – Please fix this sermon, God.

This wasn't all bad, of course. I find great comfort and freedom when I get straight about the source of life and goodness. The problem I realized this week is that I treat God like a spiritual Red Bull. When I'm running low, I take a swig and wait for the caffeine high to take me where I want to go. My requests were of the "Gas me up" variety rather than the "Your will be done" variety.

The trouble with Red Bull Jesus is that God isn't merely the coal for your train, he's the conductor as well. And the Bible makes clear that god as conductor will often take your train to some pretty ugly, painful places. (If you're wondering about the Red Bull and train metaphors, it's that I spend too much time with graduate students and toddlers).

God commands us to take care of widows, and hungry people, and orphans, and the poor. He tells us to wash people's feet. And he tells us to go outside the gates of the shiny city and to spend our time instead at the dump. In doing so, he invites us to give ourselves to the dying and the mourning, those who are dirty, in pain, and afraid. And he reminds us in today's story of Lazarus that he will be with us when we do. I bring you the good news that the creator and sustainer of all life is present with the grieving; he is, in fact, grief-stricken himself.

This is the God I met 9 years ago. I was 33 weeks pregnant when my husband, Scott, died from complications incurred during a routine surgery. 10 days later, I had a cesarean to deliver our daughter, Sarah, who had died in utero. Some days now, I wonder how I lived through that. It certainly wasn't because of the support of my religious Christian friends and colleagues. I wasn't a Jesus follower at the time, and most of my Christian friends thought this little tragedy of mine was just the thing that God would use to bring me to him. So they comforted me with lots of helpful wisdom. "Don't worry, Tara, this was all part of God's plan." Really, I thought, then God sucks! "God never gives us more than we can handle." Really? What about the people who sink into decade-long clinical depressions after great loss? What about the astronomical rates of divorce after a child dies? "If you would just put your faith in Jesus, he will give you your hearts desires." Really? Isn't it a little late for that? One lovely woman told me that God was wise to take Sarah; after all, it would be much easier to find another husband if I didn't have children.

Thank God for my non-religious friends. They came and slept on the floor with me in the hospital and in my bed at home for weeks afterward. They cried with me, strongly encouraged me to take the morphine I was offered, and told incredibly inappropriate jokes. For example, Scott and Sarah both died at Beth Israel Hospital in NJ. And whenever someone new would come into my hospital room after the C-section, my friends would cheerfully greet the newcomer with, "Welcome to Death Israel." Many people don't appreciate that kind of gallows humor, but I do and I am grateful for friends who do as well.

I'm even more grateful for the Bible, which speaks loving truth loudly enough to call us past well-meaning Christians and into a relationship with God himself. Instead of presenting himself as a candy store of goodies I would get if I joined his team, God led me, through the only Christian I knew who resisted platitudes and explanations, to the book of John and to the story of Lazarus in the middle of that book. There, God sang to me this simple refrain, one that sounded quite different from that of my religious friends. He sang this to me: Jesus was greatly disturbed. Jesus was deeply moved. Jesus wept.

This powerful refrain changed my life forever. Interestingly, it wasn't the resurrection that first drew me to Jesus. The idea of resurrection was confusing, even offensive, at the time. But a man overcome with grief was something I could understand and hang on to. Jesus was greatly disturbed. Jesus was deeply moved. Jesus wept.

*For the Bible text for this talk Click
(or control-click) [John 11:1-45](#)
(You must be connected to the Internet)*

Why was he so disturbed? The Greek root of the word, translated here as disturbed, means to snort with anger. I love this image. Jesus so angry he was snorting. Some translations say he was groaning. Snorting, groaning, weeping. This is not the Sunday school Jesus who is gentle, WASPy, and canoodling a lamb.

Why was he so disturbed? Hadn't he just told the disciples that the reason he waited to come was precisely so that he could raise Lazarus from the dead? Wasn't this part of his plan? But when Martha comes out to meet Him, imploring him to use his power to fix things, he doesn't say, "Don't worry – He'll be fine in just a few hours." Instead, he implies that Lazarus will rise again, as all followers of Jesus will someday do. Then he sends for Mary.

When Mary comes out, Jesus sees her weeping, and sees the friends who have come with her also weeping, and scripture tells us, "He was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved." Next, He asks where they have laid Lazarus. When the mourners ask Him to come and look for himself, Jesus weeps. When He arrives at the tomb, He is again greatly disturbed. What do we make of all of this? Why is he so upset when he knows what is about to happen?

For me, this story highlights two aspects of Jesus' character: his hatred of death & his ability to be fully present in the moment of pain. Let's start with the first: Jesus hates death. Hates it. The only other time we see Jesus weep in the gospels is when he looks over the city of Jerusalem and weeps at their fate. He knows that they and their temple will be destroyed. Because their hearts are deaf to him, a kind of spiritual death, they will be cut off from their land and scattered to the ends of the earth. God's people, and by extension the world, are not as they should be, and it grieves him.

We too know that the world is not as it should be. From the global to the intimately personal, there is death all around. Divorce, and tsunamis, and wars, and lies. Hearts that are dead to the suffering of the homeless passed each day, and hearts that have grown bitter to those with whom they live. The death caused myself and others when I spend more on going out to eat than on feeding the 16000 children who die each day from hunger-related causes, Almost a hundred since I began talking. God is aware that all is not as it should be, and he hates it.

His hatred of death leads to the second aspect of his character highlighted in this story: the ability to be fully present in the moment of pain. It doesn't seem to matter that Lazarus will rise later that day. In this place, for this moment, Lazarus is dead and Jesus weeps. His assurance of the future doesn't diminish his capacity for grief. Instead, it seems to enhance it. In other words, in the shadow of life as it should be and will be, this loss is all the more unbearable.

I've heard people say that Jesus is weeping only out of sympathy for Mary and Martha. But I don't think so. If he had been, wouldn't the fellow mourners have said, "See how he loves Mary." Instead, they say, "See how he loved him," referring to Lazarus.

Jesus is able to fully hold the knowledge of the resurrection in balance with the moment of pain. It seems to me that the church often loses sight of this balance. We seem to think that pain and grief are, if not opposites of healing and resurrection, than at least on the road to healing and resurrection. It is possible to see grief differently though. Gerald May writes that grief is "not a step toward something better. No matter how much it hurts – and it may be the greatest pain in life – grief can be an end itself, a pure expression of love." To this way of thinking, Jesus' grieving, both the snorting and the weeping, is a pure expression of his love.

As I read the Bible, you were not promised an easy life, or even a happy life. You were not promised intelligent, healthy children. You were not promised a marriage partner or wealth. But Praise God, we are invited to love and serve a grieving Lord.

I don't know what God might do to resurrect the death in our lives – we may get many of the goodies we often spend so much time praying for. But I'm fairly certain that if my children and husband are hit by a green line train and killed today on the way home, he won't resurrect them. But if they are killed, even as I rage against Him for failing to be the kind of Red Bull God I demand him to be, I believe that he will continue to stand near me. The real comfort I take from this story isn't that he will fix everything for me the way he did for Mary and Martha. My comfort is that if my family dies tonight, he'll hate it even more than I will. And if I turn my ear to his voice, I will hear him snorting and weeping. That is the Power of Christ, the kind of real power source that allows a bereft man to write, "it is well with my soul."

God is good. Not because he gives out the best prizes, not because he rewards our faith with favor. Our reward is not a post doc fellowship, homeland security, or even a cure for our cancer. By entering the pain and suffering and death in this world, God offers us himself. That is our reward. He is good because he never leaves us,

especially in times of grief. Friendships, families and churches that miss this miss the best thing Jesus has to offer – HIMSELF.

What should we do in response to this gift – this God who groans and weeps with us when things are not as they should be? What does it mean to let God power you for loss?

If you are in acute pain right now, the crippling kind of pain that stops your heart, that feels as much like fear as sorrow, your response might simply be to huddle up under the cross and receive the baptism of his tears. This is the outrageous claim of our faith. Jesus weeps for you. For you specifically. It is his gift of love given specifically to you. And you can rest in it.

For the rest of us, our response might take us beyond ourselves. If this grieving God is your power source, your conductor, he wants to weep with you over your losses, yes, but he also wants to take you outside the gates to grieve with him over the broken world. He wants to power you to mourn with the mourning.

Charles River Church is not immune to death and loss and illness and pain anymore than I am personally. I know only a small number of you, and this is what I know some of you are struggling with even tonight. Broken bodies and broken hearts. The death of parents and friends. Depression and anxiety. Infidelity and infertility. Failure and rejection. The list goes on. And if you think I am talking about you or someone you know, you might be surprised by the number of people who fit into each category.

Beyond these walls, there is much to weep over as well: AIDS orphans in Malawi. Military and civilian casualties in Iraq. Date rape victims here at BU. Much to grieve.

My question is, “Are we grieving?” “Where is our outrage? Where are our tears?” It’s not enough to leave the burden of grieving to God alone. Verse 31 of our story says, “When the Jews who had been with Mary in the house, comforting her, noticed how quickly she got up and went out, they followed her supposing she was going to the tomb to mourn there.” The message is – where you go to mourn, I will go to mourn. We are to serve a mourning Lord in the fellowship of a mourning church.

My Grandpa Jesse died three years ago. He was the patriarch of my large Jewish family. Among the many Jewish bereavement rituals that encourage and support grieving, one stands out for me as I think about my Zetti’s death.

Each week at temple, anyone who is grieving is invited to pray the Mourner’s Kaddish. Devout Jews know the kaddish by heart. The catch is that you can only say it when a minyan, or group of ten (traditionally men), is present. As was true for Mary and Martha, as my raunchy and loving friends knew, you are not to mourn alone.

The evening that my grandfather was buried, friends and family gathered in my grandmother’s living room, where we were sitting shiva. She sat in the middle weeping, her children holding her up. Little old Jewish men from all over her gated community in Florida came in and began to rock and chant in Hebrew, at the end of which we all recited the Kaddish.

Wanna know what it says? The Kaddish is an affirmation of God’s goodness and sovereignty. It doesn’t say that God will make everything better or that God had a divine reason for this loss. During the service, there is little mention of loss and sadness. The fact that we have gathered to pray as mourners is the statement itself – mourning matters, and in times of mourning, we gather as a community, to recognize and share our pain, to acknowledge the goodness of God and to call on His presence.

Where are our corporate Christian grieving rituals? Where is our mourner’s kaddish?

While I find the absence of such rituals disturbing, it is not as though we are left with nothing. The power of God not only summons you, but equips you, to mourn with the mourning. When you call on our Abba, when you draw on the love and forgiveness and compassion of the Son, when you seek the guidance of God’s continuing spirit on Earth, you can join the grieving, knowing that God is there grieving also.

Some people tell me that they just don’t know what to do or say when someone is in real pain. I’m a big fan of the time—tested casserole – feeding people sends many of the right messages. The same is true of showing up with a mop or a bag of groceries. And when you don’t know what to say, you can’t go wrong with, “I don’t know what to say, but I want you to know how sorry I am.” But it’s not about saying or doing the right thing.

My best friend Debby is not what one would call touchy-feely, and in twenty years of friendship, we’ve never even hugged. But when they wheeled me upstairs on a gurney 9 years ago to meet the team of nurses who help to deliver dead babies, I knew that Debby would be with me. Debbie stood there for 45 minutes and bore witness to the birth of my first child. She watched as the surgeons removed Sarah’s lifeless body. She stood on tiptoe so that she

could make sure the surgeon sewed up my engorged and bloody uterus just right. And she stayed as the nurses washed Sarah's cold, tiny body so that she was clean when I held her 40 minutes later. Debby didn't have the right words. There was nothing she could "DO." But she stood by me in my grief. It's no simpler nor more difficult than that.

Other people tell me they are afraid that opening their hearts to grieve with the world will leave them feeling morose and powerless. This isn't my experience. The hospice nurses I know are full of life in a way most of us never experience. And while outrage and weeping alone will not feed the world's hungry or bring back your neighbor's partner, they can open you to God's direction in ways you never imagined. It may not be enough to simply allow yourself to be broken-hearted, but I think it's the only place from which God can use you to bring about redemption and resurrection. When you are faced with the world's, or your neighbor's, losses, open your heart to God's heart, and he will weep through you, releasing both the tears and actions that can heal a weeping world. AMEN?

I know that we normally break into groups to talk now, but I thought we'd try something different today. I'm going to ask you to respond in writing to the following questions:

1. Is there an area of your life where you long for a baptism of tears? What would it mean if you knew that Jesus was weeping for you? What do you want/need to hear him say or do?
2. Ask God to break your heart for some part of your neighborhood or world. Where do you need God to power you to weep and cry out in indignation? What are some of your fears as you think about weeping for the world?

When we get back together, we'll say the recite the Kaddish together, followed by singing "It is well with my soul," which is as close to a Christian Kaddish as anything I know.

(after re-convening)

If you are mourning anyone or anything today, if you miss someone or have been hurt by someone, if you are mourning a lost dream, a lost friend or your piece of mind, if you feel sad for some reason known only to you and God. If your heart is breaking for the world, or breaking because it isn't, I invite you to stand and recite the Kaddish, knowing that we are mourning with you and that our good and faithful Lord is mourning with you as well. And when we begin singing "It is well with my soul," we invite you to lay question responses in the basket at the foot of the cross. A few of us, including Will, will gather them without reading them and pray over them throughout the week.

The Kaddish (an English translation)

May the great Name of God be exalted and sanctified, throughout the world, which he has created according to his will. May his Kingship be established in your lifetime and in your days, and in the lifetime of the entire household of Israel, swiftly and in the near future; and say, Amen.

May his great name be blessed, forever and ever.

Blessed, praised, glorified, exalted, extolled, honored elevated and lauded be the Name of the holy one, Blessed is he- above and beyond any blessings and hymns, Praises and consolations which are uttered in the world; and say Amen. May there be abundant peace from Heaven, and life, upon us and upon all Israel; and say, Amen.

He who makes peace in his high holy places, may he bring peace upon us, and upon all Israel; and say Amen.