



Not Forgotten

*Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsohn given for the people of St. John's Episcopal Church
December 9, 2018, The Service of Loss & Remembrance*

We are all here for many reasons. In the world outside our doors, many people are getting ready for Christmas and Hanukkah and the other holidays – getting trees, buying presents, making guest lists and planning big meals. In our tradition, these four weeks leading up to Christmas are not just a time of joyful preparation. This is Advent which is a time of longing and hopeful expectation, a season in which as the scriptures say “the people who sat in darkness and the shadow of death have seen a great light.” And I know that for many of us, this time is especially poignant. Some of us have lost our beloveds recently. Some lost loved ones long ago, but that ache never really goes away. Some of us have other struggles. We have lost jobs and physical health and mental health. Some experience shame about what we have become or were never able to be. I have heard it said that the hardest loss is the thing you never had. And this season, these losses can feel especially painful when everywhere we go we just see festivity and cheer and happiness. It can feel as if we don’t belong. The first six weeks after a funeral, people can be so kind. But then the rest of the world moves on, and we cannot. It can feel as if we are forgotten.

And so we gather here. We gather together in church, to lament and mourn and worship all at the same time. We gather our grief and direct it to God. Some of you might find it difficult to trust the idea of God in your grief. I get it. What are we to make of a God who does not prevent suffering in this world?

In all my years of seminary and practice as a minister and priest, I have never heard an answer to that question that satisfied both my head and my heart. But I can share a little bit about my own experience. In twelve step programs they know that it is a bad idea to try to give anyone advice. Instead, they share what they call their “experience, strength and hope.” Forgive me, because I shared this story with you three years ago, but it is as real to me today as it was then.

Some of you know that I have a beautiful fourteen year old daughter, Carly. I also had four miscarriages. One year in the fall we were trying to get pregnant for the last time. I remember seeing the pregnancy stick and there were two lines on it, and I was afraid to let myself hope for another baby. So fall continued, and Thanksgiving went by, and I was still pregnant. Then Advent came, and I miscarried.

I remember thinking I couldn't possibly go to church. I didn't think I could stand coming to church and hearing all about pregnant Mary. Everything would be pointing toward this beautiful baby, and it would just be too painful. But I did decide to come.

In the church where I attended there were fourteen stations of the cross around the sanctuary. Stations of the cross depict Jesus' passion, his arrest and crucifixion and death. That particular morning when I went to church, I sat in my usual spot in the pews. And at some point in the service, I looked up, and my eye fell on the station of the cross nearest me. It was Mary, holding her dead son in her arms.

And suddenly I realized that our tradition is not cute. It is not the story about a perfect family with 2.2 children living behind a white picket fence in the perfect neighborhood. It is not just the sweet nativity scene we have here. It was the story of an unwed pregnant teenager who was forced to travel to register in her hometown so her colonial oppressor could tax her. It was the story of a baby born to a peasant family who had to become refugees due to political persecution. And it was the story of a mother who dearly loved her son, who had to watch him die a terrible death.

What I realized, what I felt in my heart, is that our tradition, and the living God at the heart of it, is like a giant castle on the shore of the sea, and the waves of loss and violence and grief can crash against it, but not destroy it. The stories of our tradition are big enough for each of the stories that we brought with us today. We aren't on the outside looking in like orphans looking through the windows at a candy store. We are exactly the heart of our tradition. Our God is a God who deals with human suffering by entering into it with us. God is closer than our own breath, closer than our own names, and weeps with us. Where is God? Right in the heart of your own pain. And the love of God is stronger than death, or violence, or shame, or loss. When everything else crumbles away, the love of God for us and with us remains.

In this tradition, out of situations of no hope and breathtaking pain, God breathes life into us, like the life breathed into Jesus in the tomb, like the breath of life into the nostrils of the first person, like the light God spoke into being at the beginning of all creation. Like the first shoot that pokes out of the ground every spring after a long winter.

Soon it will be the longest night of the year. It is no accident that the baby Jesus comes to us so close to the winter solstice. My prayer for you is that you know utterly that you are not forgotten. As the reading from Isaiah says, “Can a nursing mother forget her child? Even if she forgets, I will not forget you,” says God. May this God, for whom you have never been or ever will be forgotten, wipe every tear from your eyes, because God has also wept. May God embrace you with a love that is eternal, that will never let go of you. And may the seed of hope be planted, deep in your being. Amen.