

The First Mennonite Church of Vineland
“Love and grief, glory and belief”
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Craig Janzen Neufeld

I’ve come to learn that I don’t do well when we’re renovating our home. I love the work, I love making the changes, I love the vision of something new happening, but I always seem to get impatient partway through. When we updated the bedrooms, about halfway through, I was ready for it to be done. I was tired of sleeping in the second bedroom with a shuffling distance between the bed and the wall. When we updated the bathroom, I got tired of having to wash my hair in the laundry tub, thank goodness I have as little as I do. When we tackled the rec-room this summer, I was exhausted by the process of “getting there.” I could already envision the finished look, and I simply wanted to be done. Frankly, who could blame me? Our entire basement was crammed into the upstairs or the spare room. God help me when we choose to update the kitchen.

Between now and Easter, we’re likely going to feel this frustration of being in-between, being caught between how things are and how we’d like things to be, for two reasons. First, our Lent material is inviting us to dwell in this dissonance of how we want things to be and how they are. In each of the passages that we’re going to look at this seas, we’re going to see this tension of living in-between. Secondly, our Scriptures are focused on Jesus’ last week of life. The time between Palm Sunday and Good Friday. It’s going to feel like things are, maybe, being dragged out.

And much like folk who would like to jump from Palm Sunday to Easter, we’re going to have to sit in some of the messiness before we can get to the lovely renovation on the other side. We might grumble, ‘let’s get on with it already.’ The point of this worship series is to have us live in that unsettled time of in-between.

This year, Lent begins by forcing us to dwell with one of the rawest and most unpredictable feelings that humanity faces: grief. The therapists and social workers amongst us would likely nod their heads if I were to wax on about how grief is a very personal journey, how we shouldn’t rush our way through it, or how there are many stages of grief (thank you, Kubler-Ross). I want to take a different spin today and reflect on the in-between-ness, the tension, or the dissonance that grief brings into our lives.

Grief holds a tension in our lives because it sits right between the reality of what we’re experiencing and how we would like things to be. And it’s uncomfortable. We know that if we can just get through ‘this,’ whatever it may be, we know that we might feel different. And we see the rawness of this grief present in Mary’s response to Jesus in this morning’s scripture reading.

In John 11, we spend our time with ‘a certain man’ named Lazarus, and with *certain* people who deeply loved him. While away, Jesus receives news that Lazarus has fallen ill. Jesus, though, appears not to be too concerned, even when he declares to the disciples that he knows that Lazarus has already died! Jesus sets out with the disciples and arrives four days after Lazarus has died. The exact number of days doesn’t matter; this is John’s way of telling us readers that Lazarus is well and truly dead.

Upon arriving at Lazarus’ home, Lazarus’s sisters, Mary and Martha, approach him and lament (and I’m not sure that word encapsulates well the emotion), confront, and accuse Jesus, “...if only you had been here...this wouldn’t have happened.”

I'm sure the crowds sitting shiva with Mary and Martha were thinking a similar thing. I can imagine the chatter, side comments muttered under people's breath as Jesus moves through the family. "Isn't that Jesus, the one who heals, Mary's right, I bet if he came sooner, this wouldn't have happened?" "Why didn't Jesus come sooner?" "What could have been so important for Jesus to delay rushing here?" "Didn't he know time was of the essence?"

These questions all hold a familiar, deeply human grief: the experience of an absent Christ/God in a world of pain and suffering, where things are not as we want them to be.

We, too, jump to similar accusations, similar laments, similar criticisms. In places of suffering, we accuse Christ/God of being absent. In the face of disaster and tragedy, we lament to Christ/God about not being there in time. In moments of crisis, we criticize Christ/God for delaying their arrival.

In our sadness, disappointment, and grief, we conclude that Christ or God have abandoned us.

We could easily say that Christ was and is absent in Tumbler Ridge, that God abandoned Minneapolis. We could lament that God is taking their sweet time bringing peace to Gaza or Ukraine. And we could criticize God for allowing the world to descend to the chaos and crisis that we're currently experiencing. One could be forgiven for entertaining any or all of these notions.

After witnessing the 1994 Rwandan genocide as commander of the UN peacekeeping mission, Roméo Dallaire described a profound crisis of faith. Reflecting on his experience, he said: "God had abandoned 800,000 Rwandans, my force, myself, and did absolutely nothing to stop it."

Grief and trauma lead us to this space of experiencing God's abandonment. But our story doesn't stop there.

Jesus comes to Mary, Martha and the mourners. Jesus joins them in their grief. When Jesus arrives at Lazarus's tomb, he cries in such a way that onlookers say, "See how much he loved him." Grief is an expression of deep love and care. And Jesus loves fiercely.

And so, Jesus arrives at Lazarus' tomb, in between Lazarus' death and subsequent resurrection, in the space between death and life, God arrives.

In the space between despair and hope, God is there.

In the space between sorrow and celebration, between Good Friday and Easter Sunday, God is there.

In our temptation to move from one to the other, we move past and move over God's presence. We skip over and skip past God when we try to get too quickly from one to the other. In the space between grief and love, God is there.

And while much of the time, "it does not feel like death has been defeated. Like Mary and Martha, we cry out in pain and ask our agonizing questions — about job loss, wayward children, financial crises, chronic illnesses, loss of loved ones, climate change, shadows of colonialism, war and terrorism — whatever casts death's shadow across our lives. Even as we

cry from these depths of grief and sorrow, we also live and wait in hope.”¹ Holding in tension with our grief a trust and faith that Jesus, who tells us that he is the resurrection and the life can transform our sorrow into celebration. For death and sorrow and grief do not, will not have the final word.

At the beginning of our scripture passage, not knowing the end, it certainly seems like Jesus has abandoned his dear friends. We soon learn that he has not. Jesus comes and reminds us that “Even when we are convinced that all is lost, even when we are ready to concede to the power of death, Jesus demonstrates that there is no loss, no tragedy, no power in heaven or on earth or under the earth, that can place us beyond the reach of his infinite love and abundant life.”²

Our calling, as followers of Jesus in this season of Lent, is to dwell in the in-between. To dwell in the uncomfortable, unresolved, discord, of knowing and not knowing. We’re called to live in the both-and of Jesus is present, and not yet. We’re called to linger at the edge of how things are and how things could be. Holding the tension of grief and love, loss and hope, sorrow and celebration, death and life.

And in this dwelling we’re called to notice, to pay attention to, to be sensitive to God’s presence with us. Jesus joins us. And in those moments when we feel God’s presence the farthest, Jesus reminds us that His fierce love draws Him even closer to us. Joining us in ‘it,’ whatever that ‘it’ may be.

Amen.

¹ “Commentary on John 11:1-44,” *Working Preacher*, accessed February 21, 2026, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/raising-lazarus/commentary-on-john-111-44-2>.

² Ibid.