

## 11 Pentecost 2021

God of the Morning light, it is with a sense of awe and wonder that we gather here to greet you as your people. God, help us during this hour to be strengthened by your presence.

Amen.

No one likes to suffer, and no one likes to hurt. Some may disagree with that statement, but for the most part, I believe it to be true. It is also true that almost no one can go through life without some amount of pain and suffering. It is part of being human.

The totality of human suffering is almost unfathomable. It often appears to strike some more than others. Last year, I shared about the fires that were occurring out in Oregon and the experiences I had there with the Red Cross. The town of Detroit, Oregon was wiped out, and the residents in the shelter had no where to go and for most, no personal belongings were left. Most were in shock and others angry. This past week, the folks from Greenville, CA found their community in ruins, by the Dixie fire.

An article in Friday's newspaper, 'The Sacramento Bee' described the devastation:

"Fence posts were smoldering, and flames were leaping from gas lines. A hotel collapsed as fire trucks cruised past. All that was left of a church was a melted plastic sign advertising an upcoming Bible study session.

Much of the tiny Plumas County community of Greenville was in ruins Thursday, reduced to ashes by the Dixie Fire.

Cal Fire said the three-week-old fire grew to 322,502 acres overnight, driven by fierce winds, and leveled parts of Greenville, a Gold Rush-era community of about 1,000. "Reports indicate that Greenville is 75 percent destroyed," federal fire officials said in an incident briefing.

At the Red Cross shelter at Springs of Hope Christian Fellowship, evacuee Jack Romero took his heeler mix, Rascal, out for a walk. He was one of a couple dozen people staying at the church, some in campers outside. Romero, 36, wasn't in Greenville when his community caught fire Wednesday, but he watched on social media as images trickled in showing homes and businesses engulfed in flames.

He's heartbroken and has no idea what to do or where to go next. "I'd meant to put down roots and stay there for a while," he said of Greenville, where he'd lived for nearly three years. "Now, I don't even have a tent," he said. "I have nothing."

Jerry Thrall, a Greenville resident who was at the Quincy evacuation shelter, said he was still waiting to hear whether his home had burned.

So far, there have been no reported fatalities. When providing spiritual care to those affected by these tragedies, there are not a lot of comforting words to say. It becomes a ministry of presence and prayer.

Understandably, people are confused, angry, and in pain. Of course, folks grieve differently and for different reasons. And no one should feel the need to quantify or explain their grief to others.

Rev. Dr. Jacqueline Lewis holds a Master of Divinity from Princeton Theological Seminary and a Ph.D. in Psychology and Religion from Drew University.

Rev. Lewis preaches about grief: She writes;

“I think grief puts us in touch with our vulnerabilities. I think the feeling of grief lets us know the power of wounds to shape our stories. I think it lets us know how capable we are of having our hearts broken and our feelings hurt. I think it lets us know the link that we each have because we’re human. Because we’re human, we hurt. Because we’re human, we have tears to cry. Because we’re human, our hearts are broken. Because we’re human, we understand that loss is a universal language. Everybody grieves. All of humanity grieves. All of us have setbacks, broken dreams. All of us have broken relationships or unrealized possibilities. All of us have bodies that just don’t do what they used to do. Though grief is personal, every person grieves. [1]

([1] Jacqui Lewis, "Good Grief," sermon at Middle Church, July 9, 2017.)

Last week, we talked about God's response to King David's actions concerning Uriah and Bathsheba. And we heard David's penitential offering in Psalm 151.

This morning, we hear more about King David. The Book of 2 Samuel is chocked full of intrigue. It really helps to take notes as you read, in order to see who is plotting against whom and what David's sons are up to. Absalom was David's third son. He became very powerful and set out against his father.

Even though Absalom undermined David, and led a revolt against him, David still gave orders that Absalom not be killed. Despite these orders, Absalom was in fact killed and David's grief at the loss of his son was very real.

I mentioned last week that Psalm 151 was a psalm that I prayed often. Psalm 130 is another one that I can relate to.

It encapsulates a myriad of emotions in 8 short verses.

"1 Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord.

2 Lord, hear my voice!

Let your ears be attentive

to the voice of my supplications!

3 If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities,

Lord, who could stand?

4 But there is forgiveness with you,

so that you may be revered.

5 I wait for the Lord, my soul waits,

and in his word I hope;

6 my soul waits for the Lord

more than those who watch for the morning,

more than those who watch for the morning.

7 O Israel, hope in the Lord!

For with the Lord there is steadfast love,

and with him is great power to redeem.

8 It is he who will redeem Israel

from all its iniquities.”

I think that every one of us can relate to the opening of this psalm. How many times have we found ourselves in the depths of the abyss, the depths of despair, the depths of pain and sorrow; either from our own actions or as a result of things over which we have no control. The psalmist is aware of the

impulsivity of humankind. Many troubles are of our own making. Verse 3 implies that this is the case for at least some of the psalmist's troubles. As the NIV words it: "If you, O Lord, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand?" Sin is a reality that repeatedly leaves us in darkness and causes us pain. But there is hope for those that wait in darkness. I remember very well my days of standing duty in the Navy, especially during the night hours. Patrolling the empty and darkened hallways with only a flashlight, vividly aware of every noise, both real and imagined. The early dawn would bring a sense of relief that the darkness was fading, and the light of the day would soon appear.

As Christians, we realize that the Light of Christ, does not dispel all darkness. **At least not yet.** That is important because in life, the darkness is evil, pain, suffering, and despair. All things that we are well aware of. The only thing new about today's darkness are the additional ways it finds to creep into our lives. Our dreams of peace, good will, equality, justice, and freedom from pain are limited by the reality of the night around us. Thus, from our depths, we, too, cry out to God. We cry out with hope and the knowledge that God hears our cries.

In John, Chapter one, he tells us about the Light of the World; "4 In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome[a] it."

Christ is the light that shines in the darkness, the true light that has come to enlighten all people. We can approach it, embrace it, and shine hope into the lives of anyone who is seeking it. We may not be able to stop the darkness from entering our lives or the lives of others, but we can find comfort as we wait for the dawn of a new day. Yes, the light of Christ will vanquish the darkness at the end of time. Until then, we wait in hope.

So, what does The Rev. Dr. Jacqui Lewis say to those who struggle to find hope in the darkness and may feel distant from God?

"God doesn't go anywhere. We do. And we're free to. God didn't create puppets, God created humans. So, we're free to turn our back, we're free to hide our face, we're free to weep and weep and weep until we can't weep anymore. And when we look up, when we turn our face up, when we turn back around, there is God with open arms saying, 'Welcome home.'"

Amen!