

“Letting Tears Flow”
November 1, 2020

Lamentations 1:1-6, 3:19-26

A friend and colleague of mine recently posted a sermon online and as soon as I read it, I knew the sermon would be a good reference point to use on this first Sunday in November...this Sunday Christians know as All Saints Sunday. The sermon I'm referring to was preached by Rabbi Sharon Brous on Rosh Hashanah about six weeks ago (9/19/20). And her sermon was entitled, “A World is Dying, A World is Being Born.”

Rabbi Brous' sermon is framed around a story I hadn't heard before, but I imagine it might have been familiar to me if I had been raised in a Jewish household. It's a story that took place long ago in the city of Jerusalem:

“Around two thousand years ago, the holy city of Jerusalem fell under siege by the Roman Empire and its massive army. Three years into that siege, cut off from food and other vital resources and feeling a sense of increasing despair, a rabbi named Yohanan ben Zakkai, decided he had to flee the city. And Rabbi ben Zakkai devised a plan with his students whereby he would be placed in a coffin so that onlookers would presume he was dead. Then his students would march the rabbi, in the coffin, through the city gates and toward the burial grounds outside the city.

The ingenious plan worked and Rabbi ben Zakkai fled the city of Jerusalem, along with his group of students, and founded a small Jewish community named Yavneh, not far from Jerusalem city limits. Yavneh was located so close to Jerusalem, in fact, that Jews in Yavneh could smell fires raging inside the city as Vespasian Caesar and his bloodthirsty Roman forces wrought their destruction.

As part of their siege, Roman soldiers stormed the city walls and burned the holiest Jewish religious and cultural sites in the center of the city to the ground. According to the records of ancient historian, Josephus, the fire in Jerusalem grew so fierce that foundations across the whole city began to shake and crumble.

During this time, hell bent on desecration and utter humiliation, the Roman army actually catapulted the head of a pig toward the temple altar. Meanwhile, countless Jews of all ages died at the hands of Roman swords. And many Jews who avoided death by sword wound up succumbing to starvation. Or they were enslaved by Roman soldiers and taken all the way to Rome in chains, where they were publicly degraded by the Roman emperor for sport.

Meanwhile, what did Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai do in the face of all this death and destruction? Knowing his Jewish brothers and sisters were being slaughtered mercilessly and realizing there was nothing he could do to stop it, Rabbi ben Zakkai tore his clothes. He cried and screamed aloud. And he openly lamented along with the other members of his community.

Together they mourned. In response to the utter desolation, the Rabbi and his followers wept for children who had died and those who were never born. They voiced the names of men and women who were lost and could not be saved. And they memorized every single one of their Jewish sacred stories, down to the smallest details, so they could pass those sacred stories down orally to generations of Jews who would come after.” (Rabbi Sharon Brous, “A World is Dying, A World is Being Born”, pg. 2)

There has to be a place in our world for grief and lament. Given their history and all the violence and oppression they have endured through the ages, our Jewish brothers and sisters arguably grieve in healthier and more open ways than others in our society...Christians included. Yet, healthy and open grief is what people of any faith and no faith need, especially right now. In this year 2020, in the midst of incalculable loss and destruction, I think the vast majority of our country still needs to learn the merits of collective, national lament.

As we gather here for worship this morning, on this All Saints Sunday, have you and I stopped to grieve the immense loss we have experienced since this pandemic broke out in earnest in the United States in March? Nearly two hundred and thirty thousand people in the United States alone have died of COVID-19 as of today. Take the number of people who live in South Windsor, Connecticut, multiply by nine, and we are almost at that figure. And how many more deaths will there be before this pandemic is over?

Have you and I and sisters and brothers across this country taken time to stop and reflect on the sheer numbers? Each number representing a human life who couldn't be saved. One who died in an overcrowded, overtaxed hospital and had their body stored in a makeshift morgue? Another who died because they had no access to medical care. A special person who died with no loved one to hold their hand and comfort them. So many people of color, living in communities that have borne a disproportionate and unjust burden of the lives lost. And the ones who died on account of COVID-19 and yet aren't even included in the death toll for a variety of reasons?

We should be naming people like William Roosevelt Jerman, cleaner, butler and doorman in the White House for eleven presidents over the course of fifty-five years. He died of COVID-19 at age 91, having seen more history and witnessed more fascinating stories than most of us could imagine.

We should be naming people like Lorena Borjas, a transgender, immigrant activist who turned her home in New York into a shelter for people living with HIV and AIDS. Who knows how many more people Lorena would have saved had she not died of COVID-19?

We should be naming people like Dr. James Goodrich, who was a neurosurgeon and a pioneer in separating conjoined twins. How many more people would Dr. Goodrich have enabled to live independently, apart from their twin, had he not died of COVID-19?

And while we're naming people who have died of Coronavirus, people who are noteworthy to many and people who are noteworthy primarily to a small circle of loved ones, there are others we need to name and mourn in this 2020 year. Including men and women whose names we have spoken and shouted out loud in protest in recent months, but whose names we can't forget.

Breonna Taylor. George Floyd. Ahmaud Arbery. Rayshard Brooks. Daniel Prude. Each of whom lived lives that matter. Each of whom were killed needlessly on account of the stubborn, long-standing, deep rooted virus known in this country as "racism."

Does it feel to you, the way it does to me, as though we keep putting our fingers in the dam, trying to plug up massive heartache in order to keep it from flooding and overwhelming us? Picture a few weeks into the future when there will be empty seats around thousands of Thanksgiving tables. If there are any traditional, Thanksgiving tables to safely gather around this year, which is a loss worth grieving in and of itself. Picture the thousands of people missing around Christmas trees in December. And looking ahead to the new year and the long winter, are there people we know, God forbid, who will not live to see the spring?

It's hard to fathom. Not to mention the smaller scale losses that are taking a gradual toll on our bodies and our spirits. We've lost playdates and summer camps. We've lost proms and graduation ceremonies. We've lost weddings and funerals. We've lost the kind of collegiality that can't be reproduced over a computer screen. We've lost jobs and businesses we poured our hearts into. We've lost precious time with our friends and those outside our immediate circles...

Sooner or later, it will hit us. People across this nation can't just keep a stiff upper lip. We can't just get used to living with tragedy and trying to go about business as usual. We can't just wander through these days with a corporate sense of amnesia. We can't keep pretending the end is right around the corner. We can't just look for silver linings and brightly colored rainbows and happily ever after. We need to grieve. You and I are experiencing trauma, even if we're in denial and not aware of it. And most of us barely think about pausing or crying or screaming or tearing our clothes...

Fortunately, the message from our ancestors in the Jewish faith is crystal clear. The sadness will catch up to us and when it does you and I will not be able to bear the weight of it. Before we stumble and break down, we need to be honest with ourselves and with one another and not go blithely through the motions. We have to mourn and tell the truth. Only then can we begin to rebuild. (2) (Rabbi Brous, "A World is Dying, a World is Being Born", pg. 7.)

The Jews who lived in Yavneh, thirty miles outside of Jerusalem, were likely haunted by the thought of their family members and friends and neighbors wiped out by

the Roman army. And I have no doubt they missed the home they once knew inside Jerusalem. Yet, they knew they could not go back.

Instead, those Yavneh founders and settlers created a community in which Judaism was reborn. A place where the community honored and remembered where they came from and fellow Jews who lived and died before them. A place where reflection and prayer became foundations of their daily life. And a place where human relationships thrived based on compassion and love.

Someday, our country will come to a similar crossroads. Where we will look back and remember who and what we lost during this pandemic. And where we will look forward and go about creating some kind of normalcy to guide ourselves in the pandemic's wake. Will we rebuild a nation after COVID-19 that still cannot find a way to navigate and transform the inequity and the devastation this pandemic has revealed? Or will we rebuild a nation founded on truth telling and compassion and love?

Friends, I don't need to tell you this pandemic is not over. The numbers will go up and the losses will mount and the list of names will grow steadily longer. Chances are good you and I will be stretched to our breaking point in the months ahead, if we aren't there already.

Nevertheless, we hold onto faith and hope in spite of the suffering we have endured. Praying for the devastation to be over, and praying that our national and human community will someday go about rebuilding with hope. Working together as children of God to give birth to something brand new. Amen.