

Dark Grey Ashes

Rob Giesemann, Advent 2B, December 7, 2014

I am going to speak to you this morning about difficult things. And I will tell you upfront that I cannot offer a happy ending, a resurrection promise, something to make you feel better. But these are matters that Christians should consider, particularly during a season like Advent. For this is a season of preparation, of waiting on God, and asking about both ourselves and God, *Who are we?* And, *who are you?*

*When I was in college my Uncle Kent and Aunt Kathie asked me to be the godfather to Frazer, their newborn son, to which I agreed. I wasn't much of a godfather, to be honest, but when Frazer was a teenager and I was in my thirties, he visited me. We got to know each other better during that visit. We had fun - I'd grab him in a headlock, rub his head, and call him, *Razor Head Frazer*.

Frazer and I both attended Auburn University, in violation of family lawAt Auburn, Frazer met his wife, Dana, and now they have three daughters, all under the age of about six. Last year, their middle child, Milla, started having severe seizures. After extensive testing, Frazer and Dana learned that Milla has Batten's Disease, a genetic disorder that occurs in children of parents who both carry the defective gene.

The brains of children with Batten's disease regress rather than grow, during childhood, leading to seizures, blindness, coma, and death – usually by the teens. Because Batten's is inherited, Dana and Frazer had their other girls tested – And sure enough, Milla's sister, Elle, tested positive; last month she experienced her first seizure. Ann Carlyle, their third daughter, tested negative.

Perhaps you remember praying for Milla and Elle recently; they have been on our prayer list, and I have to say, if you ever thought your prayers don't matter, even when you don't know the person you are praying for, you are wrong. They do.

When I first heard the diagnosis, I wondered how I might help Frazer and Dana. What might I say, or do? Since then, Frazer's sister, Lea, has told me that people – Frazer's church included – have remained aloof – Too often, people don't know what to say or what to do, so they say and do nothing.

Having experienced palpable grief in my life, I know that saying *something* is better than saying *nothing*, but I also know it helps to say something meaningful. Only – I knew I had nothing in my little bag of pastoral tricks to help Frazer and Dana. Telling them that God understands their pain and stands with them seemed hollow - They don't care about their own pain – they care that their two girls will die. Where is grace? Where is God?

*In fact, I believe that suffering has the potential to yield meaning. You just heard Isaiah say that Israel was paid *double* for her sins. Double, and both Jewish and Christian scholars speak of this concept – double rather than one-for-one – as Isaiah's *suffering servant*. Only Jews understand Israel to be God's suffering servant - she mystically

suffers more than she deserves – double, or triple – but her suffering translates into hope for a broken world. Don't ask me how. And indeed the Jews have suffered, and more than double.

Christians understand Jesus to be Isaiah's suffering servant, likewise suffering mystically and more than he deserved. He was, like Milla and Elle – born to die. Even at the manger in Bethlehem, the cross was foreshadowed. Jesus's suffering like that of the Jews mystically facilitated grace in a broken world. Again, don't ask me how.

My own suffering is different from Israel's or Jesus'. Mine wasn't suffering for others, but I can tell you that suffering has strengthened me and made me go deeper spiritually. But I cannot place a child's suffering in the same context. An early death is never a good death, period. In fact, I *do* believe that when each child suffers, God suffers. For that matter, when anybody suffers, God suffers. But as I thought about writing Frazer and Dana, I doubted they would want to hear about God's empathy, nor would they find hope in Jesus' suffering as an adult – So what might I say to help my cousin, my godson?

As it turns out, I wrote Frazer and Dana a simple note – nothing extraordinary – I wrote that neither Milla nor Elle realize that they are supposed to live 81 years. They weren't born having that adult expectation. Instead, all they want and all they need, is Frazer's and Dana's love and care. Each day.

*So many people have experienced the loss of a child, even people in this room. John Brooks –was a parishioner at St. Stephen's when his daughter Casey jumped off the Golden Gate Bridge - John *still* suffers from Casey's death. He wrote about his experience in a column published this past week in the Chronicle. People, he wrote, either don't say anything at all – which is the worst – or they urge John to get on with his life, which – his life will never be the same - So how could he?

Nicholas Westerhoff lost one of his five children, in a mountain accident. Nicholas loved all five children the same, but when Eric died, he assumed a more central role in Nicholas' life than the other children– *Death made him special. For of the five, only he has a grave.*

*As Christians, speaking about Easter is sometimes not enough. Of resurrection hope, and life everlasting, and even the promise that better days are ahead. Words of hope can't always assuage grief. As often as not, what is required is a companionable vulnerability. You must become vulnerable to the other person in the face of their suffering. That is how you become Jesus to your neighbor in pain...Because sometimes suffering is just that – suffering. Not mystical, but meaningless.

*As I said at the outset, I don't have an easy answer. Rather, one can engage the exercise of asking always, *Who art thou, O Lord, and who am I?* The probing question will keep you in relationship. For in that question you will find companionable vulnerability. Not

in the suffering servant, Israel, or even the suffering servant, Jesus, but rather, in a father – God - who suffers, and a mother – Mary – who suffer.

Mary, you see, held her child in her arms even at birth, and though she was so very proud, death at birth was foretold... Double suffering.

And, so you see, there is this God who loves, extraordinarily. Even in the depths of your despair, this God loves you. *Who art thou, O God, and who am I?*

*A good friend of mine, Catherine Stern, helped form an organization called Project Grace. Project Grace takes parents who have lost a child - regardless of how long ago – a year, two, twenty?...on constructive trips to developing nations where moms work side by side with other moms – all who have experienced similar loss. They work on a house, or they dig a well, they help other families.

This constructive method of engaging grief doesn't erase the loss, but as these moms work and share stories with the only people who really understand – other moms – they heal, just a bit. That may not be resurrection, but it is grace – it is also a companionable vulnerability...it is a bare seedling sprouting from dark grey ashes.

Amen.