

“When Jesus Wept”

*When Jesus wept the falling tear in mercy flowed beyond all bound.
When Jesus groaned, a trembling fear seized all the guilty world around.*

In a short while we will hear an early American musical masterpiece by William Billings. The song is called “When Jesus Wept.” It is a beautiful and haunting. It is also a round. The rounds we are most familiar with are fun and maybe a little silly, such as “Row, Row, Row your Boat” or “Frere Jacques.” “When Jesus Wept” takes us somewhere very different—musically, emotionally, and spiritually. In its first line it takes us to the shortest verse in the Bible “Jesus wept.”

That scene and the story that surrounds this short verse is strange, troubling, and haunting. Jesus has come to the town of Bethany home to his friends the sisters Mary, Martha, and their brother Lazarus. We heard in the Gospel of Luke that Jesus visited this family before. At that time the issue was Martha’s busyness as she prepared a meal for Jesus and the twelve disciples in contrast to Mary’s stillness as she listened to Jesus teach. This time Martha and Mary are both frantic because their brother has died. They both state to Jesus that had he shown up earlier he could have saved their brother from death. It is a bold accusation. It is also one that points back to a decision that Jesus made.

Earlier in the passage we learn that Jesus and the disciples had heard of Lazarus’ illness. The sisters wanted him to come quickly, but Jesus made the decision to wait a couple of days before heading to Bethany. He did not wait because he feared, as some of the disciples did, that the religious authorities wanted to kill him. Jesus is not afraid of his enemies.

Jesus makes the decision to wait so that rather than curing Lazarus and saving him from death he wants to show people something much more powerful. Jesus delays his departure for Bethany so that they can be sure that Lazarus has died. It also feels cruel to let his friends Mary and Martha experience their brother’s death so that he can perform a miracle. But that is what happens. Jesus tells the disciples that Lazarus’s illness does not lead to death, but is for God’s glory, and “so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.” He goes on to say that Lazarus is only sleeping, but when they finally go to Bethany, they find that Lazarus is dead, has been dead for four days, he is wrapped in bands of cloth and is in a tomb. If Lazarus is just sleeping, he has got everyone fooled. Perhaps Jesus overestimated the amount of time to wait to head to Bethany. Possibly the time for glorifying God and the Son of God vis-à-vis Lazarus has passed.

When he arrives in Bethany the sisters are bereft and disconsolate. Not knowing he delayed responding to their message that Lazarus was sick, Martha blames him for Lazarus’ death, saying “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” Jesus questions her about her beliefs, and Martha affirms that she believes he is “the Messiah, the Son of God.” Yet when she goes to Mary she says, “the teacher is here.” If he is really the Messiah and the Son of God, it seems odd that she would refer to Jesus as simply teacher to her beloved and deeply believing sister.

Mary, who sat at Jesus’ feet to learn from him while neglecting her sister who is working tirelessly, runs to Jesus when she hears that he has come. Yet, she echoes her sister’s complaint, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” It is her weeping and the weeping of the friends and family who followed her that disturbs Jesus’ spirit and deeply moves him.

Jesus hears the complaints and anguish of Martha and Mary. He also hears the crowd who say, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?” Then he asks to see where Lazarus has been entombed. As he stands outside of the tomb he weeps. The crowd interprets it as a sign of his love for Lazarus for he is weeping as they have. But I wonder. Jesus knows that in a moment he will raise Lazarus from the dead, there is no reason to weep for his death. Perhaps Jesus weeps for another reason.

I think Jesus is weeping for the world and those who say they believe but do not. Mary and Martha are two of Jesus’ staunchest supporters. If Mary truly believes he is more than a teacher and miracle worker, why be so brazen as to accuse Jesus of not coming soon enough to save Lazarus? I think despite their proclamations of belief in Jesus they do not understand.

Jesus weeps not so much for the dead as for the living who are still entombed in their inability to see the whole truth of who he is and what he is teaching. Jesus weeps for the people who have seen a blind man given sight, but do not have sight for themselves. Mary and Martha and the crowd weep for death, Jesus weeps because they do not see the “resurrection and the life” that stands before them. They do not hear or understand when Jesus said, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me even though they die will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.”

Jesus does not weep for a man who will be raised from death. Jesus weeps for those of us who even when we see a man raised from death will not believe. Or worse yet, will see the resurrection of Lazarus as a threat. Later in this passage, the chief priests and Pharisees will see the raising of Lazarus not as a miracle and sign from God, but as a threat to the order of things that keeps them in places of authority and power. Thus, they will plan to kill Jesus. They will also plan to kill Lazarus to destroy the living example of Jesus’ power.

Jesus’ tears outside the tomb of Lazarus speak to his sadness for our unbelief and his ever-abiding mercy for all—believers and nonbelievers alike. Jesus’ tears are for our unwillingness to be born from above. Our unwillingness to fully partake of the bread of life and be changed. Jesus weeps because after two thousand years of theological parsing and debate, we still don’t get how simple the message is. Love one another. Treat each other kindly. Love God because God is love. The world resists this as surely as the chief priests and Pharisees did. That is the reason that Jesus wept and weeps still.