

# IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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The Reverend David J. Powers  
Sunday, March 27, 2022

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## Matthew 27:32-46

So if you are joining us for the first time in the season of Lent, you need to know that you are dropping in in the middle of a worship series that is covering the stages of grief. Now what does it look like for...for each of us to navigate grief? What does it look like for us to do that as a community as well? So if you opened your bulletin this day, and you saw the title Good Grief, Depression, you need to know this isn't something we talk about every single week. There are lighter things, but it's important. It's important that we have a conversation about what it looks like to grieve and to reach this stage of grief that is so weighty and so difficult. A reminder as we've had each week that this process, these stages of grief, while they...they seem linear to us, they are not. They are very fluid. As we grieve, we move in and out of each of these stages, okay? And whether we're grieving a death or whether we are grieving a loss of some other kind, we will navigate these stages in a unique way to us, okay? So there's no right way to do this. Each of us has a different journey. We believe that God is with us on that journey. I want you to know also that, um, maybe this series, maybe you're here in this series because it is for you. Perhaps you are dealing with an acute loss, or maybe communally, you are a part of a community that has dealt with loss and grief. Or perhaps this series is not just for you but for someone that you are close to. Perhaps they need to hear, perhaps you need to be equipped to be able to walk alongside them in the midst of their grief. And so, if you're dropping in for the first time this Sunday, we really encourage you, hop on our YouTube channel, check out the last few weeks, catch up on kind of where we are in the sort of conversations we've had about grief. I also want to just make a distinction too. When we...we move and we use this word depression, I want to make a distinction between those who struggle clinically with depression over a longer period of time and those who experience depression in the acute phases of grief too. I don't want to demean the experiences of people and say that we can somehow reduce someone who struggles with depression in a more clinical fashion to a 20-minute sermon, okay? It's not what we're talking about here necessarily, although some of the...the characteristics, they're going to look the same. They're going to manifest the same, but they are unique, okay? So let's keep that in mind as we indeed read from the Gospel of Matthew. We are in the 27th chapter. We're going to start in verse 32 and move through verse 46.

As they went out, they came upon a man from Cyrene named Simon; they compelled this man to carry Jesus's cross. And when they came to a place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull), they offered him wine to drink, mixed with gall; but when he tasted it, he would not drink it. And when they had crucified him, they divided his clothes among themselves by casting lots; then they sat down there and kept watch over him. Over his head they put the charge against him, which read, 'This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.'

Then two bandits were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left. Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, 'You who would destroy the temple and build it

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in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.' In the same way the chief priests also, along with the scribes and elders, were mocking him, saying, 'He saved others; he cannot save himself? He is the King of Israel; let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to; for he said, "I am God's Son.'" The bandits who were crucified with him also taunted him in the same way.

From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, 'Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani' that is, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of our Lord endures forever. Amen.

I can remember the first time it happened. I walked into a dark house, the only thing giving light and sound was a television in the corner of the living room. By way of background, a few months earlier I had been forced to move out of my rental house in Madison, Georgia. By circumstance or providence, a good buddy had recently come to need a roommate to help carry his mortgage. It had been about a year since he got home late from a church meeting, and his wife met him in the kitchen to tell him that she wanted a divorce.

Of course there's more to the story. There always is more to the story, but for our purposes you simply need to know that he was devastated by this announcement. My friend intended to be married to his wife for the entirety of his life. Despite any difficulties they might have had, he planned to be there.

But that night I made my way by touch into a dark kitchen. I stood in about the same place where his now ex-wife had stood when she broke the news to him. And I let my eyes adjust to the screen, to the figure on it, and then my ears. I let them adjust to the sound. A man with a guitar and a voice that ached with pain sang a song that I'd come to know as Elephant.

The troubadour's name was Jason Isbell. Many of you might be familiar with him. He grew up in Alabama. His sound has shaped a couple of really significant bands, and for the last several years he's been making music that unapologetically bears his soul.

Elephant is a devastating song about a man named Andy and a friend trying to pretend that she's not dying of cancer. It's excruciating to listen to, but I stood in the kitchen and stared at the only thing that gave light in that room, and I listened as Jason sang these words. "She said 'Andy, you crack me up.' Seagram's in a coffee cup, sharecropper's eyes and the hair almost all gone. When she was drunk, she'd make cancer jokes, made up her own doctor's notes. Surrounded by her family, I saw that she was dying alone, so I'd sing her classic country songs, and she'd get high

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and sing along. She don't have much voice to sing now. We'd burn these joints in effigy and cry about what we used to be and try to ignore the elephant somehow.”

The elephant for Andy and his friend was cancer. Standing in that kitchen the elephant was the weight of my friend's grief.

Jason finished singing that song. The crowd at the Lincoln Center applauded, and then he interrupted. He knows how heavy his music is. He said, “You know, I sang that song a few nights ago, and when I was done the room fell silent, and then a guy in the back with sarcasm in his voice said, ‘Now sing us a sad song, Jason.’ A buddy let out a laugh that I could tell had come through tears, the sort of laugh that acknowledges the weight of the moment while also breaking the tension of the room.”

So we become voyeurs into the scene of Jesus, this scene described by the Gospel of Matthew, terrible and chaotic in its complexity. A man grabbed from a crowd, given a cross and told to carry it. Jesus being offered sour wine and then being hung from a tree, and a group of people casting lots for his clothes. But hanging him from a tree wasn't enough; they needed to post the charges above his head.

Everyone who passed him taunted him. Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, “You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself. If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.” In the same way the chief priests also, along with the scribes and elders, were mocking him saying, “He saved others, cannot save himself. If he's the king of Israel let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him and trust in God. Let God deliver him now if he wants to, for he said I am God's son.”

And then something happens. The gospel writer says that from “noon on darkness came over the whole land...from noon on darkness came over the whole land.”

If you have ever sat in a dark room listening to sad music, if you've ever experienced what it is like to walk into depression, that's what it feels like.

Things are bright and sunny, and then darkness falls. It rolls in unexpectedly. It doesn't announce itself, but it permeates all of who you are. It feels like a weight of sadness. It manifests as hopelessness.

“From noon on darkness came over the whole land.”

To me this is the image, the most, perhaps, difficult stage of this grieving process. Jesus, hung to a tree, being derided by all who pass by and then for three hours darkness comes across the land;

and then in a voice that could only muster a few words, Jesus cries, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

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That's the voice of depression. It's not too dissimilar from the voice of the psalmist. "How long Oh Lord, how long? Will you forget me forever?"

There's this echo threaded from the psalmist's voice through Christ's about what it looks like and what it means to feel forsaken. That's what depression feels like. It's a deep sadness. It's a weight of hopelessness, and it's something that as we navigate grief together, as we move through stages together, we will experience.

It might not be something you want to admit though. Now as I think about it years later, I am really glad that for whatever reason I ended up living with my buddy for about two years. Because there were two ways that seeing could happen. One is I could walk in and stand in the place where his wife stood when she told him that their marriage was over, and I could just be there and be present with him. The other, of course, is that he could sit alone in a house listening to that music night after night after night. I'm grateful to God that I got to stand there.

As excruciating as it is to listen to, some of Jason's music, some of it's cathartic too. Me and my buddy lived together for the better part of two years. Not all stories end like this, but...but he met a lovely lady. The nights and the episodes of me coming home to a darkened house, they became less and less frequent over time. He moved through that season of grief, that deep depression; and while it comes back every once in a while, like it will for each of us and our community together, it's something that he knows now how to navigate. Listen to some music, let himself go to where he needs to go, then move through.

As a way to mark the end of our living together, I bought us tickets to see Jason Isbell at the Fox Theater in Atlanta. It was two hours of beautiful music. I don't want you to get the wrong idea. He has some really depressing songs, but he has some incredible songs too.

Got done with the concert, and we cheered as loud as we could. And he came back on for one song as an encore. He obliged our clapping, and he came out, and he sat by himself, and he played a nine and a half minute version of his song Anxiety. It was terrible, y'all. We packed up our things. I said, "I gotta go, man," and we left and went home.

It can be brutal to navigate this stage, but here's what you need to know. When the darkness falls on you, when it rolls in unexpectedly in the midst of noontime, it comes upon you or someone close to you, you need to remember how normal it is to the process of grief. This is a stage that must be navigated. It is part of our individual process and our collective process.

The reality is you're going to move in and out of it probably multiple times before you're done with it. You might never be done with it. I told you I got together with Angela Kelly early on in this series, and one of the things she told me was, "You know when we're talking about grief, we have to tell our story. We have to tell our story a thousand times. We have to tell of our

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heartbreak, we have to tell of our loss, we have to tell even of our depression. We've got to tell it a thousand times, and a thousand might not be enough for us."

But every time we tell it, we have to remember, we have to know as we listen to the echoes of the words of Jesus on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" We need to know that God, more than any other power in the universe, knows the power of darkness, that Christ, hung to that tree, was present when the sun went away and the clouds came and darkness fell. We are not alone as we've said so many times through this season

The encouragement though, of course, is to muster the courage to sit in it, to process it, to talk about it, to cry, to laugh.

Jan Richardson has a blessing for the broken hearted. Jeanene shared it with me this week, and I thought it was appropriate for us this morning.

"Let us agree for now that we will not say that the breaking makes us stronger or that it is better to have this pain than to have done without this love. Let us promise we will not tell ourselves time will heal the wound when every day our waking opens it anew. Perhaps for now it can be enough to simply marvel at the mystery of a heart so broken, the mystery of a heart so broken that can go on beating as if it were made for precisely this, as if it knows the only cure for love is more of it, as if it sees the heart's sole remedy for breaking is to love still, as if it trusts that its own persistent pulse is the rhythm of a blessing we cannot begin to fathom, but will save us nonetheless."

May it be so.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God, Mother of us all. Amen.