

**Getting through the night**

**Readings: Psalm 30 & John 11:1-45**

**Don't we live in a beautiful world?**

**It's just jaw-dropping in places. The colours, textures and shapes. And in Nelson we get the beauty volume knob tweaked up even further. My family and I still haven't got sick of the commute in from Motueka every day. Even in the rain, breath-taking scenery is around every corner.**

**Think about the Riwaka resurgence, the view across Lake Rotoiti, the Marlborough Sounds...**

**But then, sometimes, something happens. An event, or some news and it just sucks all the life and colour out of our world.**

**I have some of those sorts of stories, but before I share them and before we get too far into this, I'd like to say that preparing this sermon dragged up some stuff for me. Sermon writing and preaching can be a costly thing.**

**And I'm guessing if it dragged stuff up for me, then there's a chance it might drag up stuff for some of you too. These are big, complicated thoughts and once we get in there and start pulling up the floorboards, you never know what might come out. There will be prayer ministry people up the front, so please avail yourself of their services if you need them. Otherwise, find someone you trust, put on a pot of tea and talk to them.**

**I want to pray before we start:**

**God, Thank you for being with me as I prepared this sermon. Thank you for being with us now as we delve into one of life's dark corners. We pray that we feel your presence like a big, warm duvet, and you are able to speak to us through these words.**

**Amen**

**On the 28th of November 1985 my Dad, Paul Summerfield, got up before dawn, had breakfast, and left for work.**

**He never came home.**

**He was a senior and very experienced missionary pilot flying with MAF in Papua New Guinea. One day that 'bad thing', the thing my parents and talked about and knew was a possibility, happened.**

**Nobody's sure exactly why, but he left Mount Hagen, bound for a mission station called Chungribu. The flight involved crossing the rugged Schraeder Range. Enroute, the weather worsened. He radioed to say that he and his passenger, a theologian from Sydney would be there in 15 minutes. But they never showed up. Later that afternoon the automatic emergency locator beacon was detected. My Mum received a phone call, and managed, through her tears, to tell her little kids that "Daddy's gone missing". "Gone missing" was a well known phrase in MAF circles and even at age 10, I knew what it meant.**

The next day, once the weather cleared enough to get a helicopter in the air, Mike-Foxtrot-Echo, my Dad's trusty Cessna 206 was found on a mountainside, set up for a forced landing and pointing the wrong way.

He never made a mayday call.

Was there an issue with the plane? Had he seen the weather, figured he didn't want to fly into it and tried to turn back? Did he just mess up? We'll never know because the rugged terrain made a proper investigation impossible.

Both my Dad and his passenger were killed instantly. And, just like that, my Mum was all by herself, in Papua New Guinea, with four kids aged between 10 and 4.

We're going to spend some time today looking at Psalm 30 - a Psalm that brought tremendous comfort to my Mum as she worked through the days, weeks and years after my Dad was killed. And then again two years later when my Uncle Graham was also killed, in PNG, in a motorbike accident.

One particular line from that Psalm has stayed with me from that time, as my siblings and I kept saying it to each other in an effort to help each other along: "Tears may flow in the night, but there will be joy in the morning".

How can we ever feel joy again after such things? When you look ahead and all you can see is darkness stretching out in front of you?

Psalm 30 is known as one of the "Thanksgiving Psalms", and I think we can all agree it certainly has a thanksgiving feel. But there's something raw and visceral about this psalm too. It has the "primal scream" about it.

Psalm 30 has been attributed to King David, and I'm happy enough that David could have written it. He certainly had his share of rough times.

But it's clear that whoever wrote the Psalm started out, as we all do, before one of these huge life events. Totally normally.

In aviation they talk about flying along 'fat, dumb and happy'. Where everything seems to be going OK. It's smooth, sunny and life's pretty good. It's during these times that you start to relax and perhaps let your guard down a little. And then WHAM! Something happens.

The psalmist recognises this. There is even a note of arrogance in their previous state. They were prosperous, and happy with the fact God was looking after them. But then something happened. For the author of the Psalm it's as if God abandoned them and walked off.

"Tears may flow in the night"

As I prepared for this sermon I have been running those words around in my head. There are so many people I know, stuck weeping in their own personal night-time.

**I have a mate who's wife died very recently after battling cancer. He's the same age as me and he's now a single Dad with three little kids to look after. Tears!**

**A close friend of our family lost her husband a few years back, after an accident, and now one of her kids has started to self-harm, and she's having to call the Police to deal with him. Tears!**

**A friend of a friend walked into one of those horrible, poisonous new jobs with back-stabbing and sabotaging colleagues. Compounded by the fact that, in the middle of this job stress, her partner left her and chose to break the news to her at the start of a much anticipated holiday. Tears!**

**A friend took up a vicar's position just before being hit by the most crippling depression. The fall-out nearly destroyed her and her congregation. Tears!**

**I'm sure if I opened this up to the floor, you could all add a bunch of stories to this pile. A lot of us are walking around carrying very, very heavy loads.**

**Where on earth is God in these situations? How do we end up in place where we can praise God, like David in Psalm 30?**

**I want to change tack slightly and switch to looking at our Gospel reading.**

**Jesus has three friends, Martha, Mary and Lazarus. And for Jesus, they really do seem to have been genuine mates.**

**Word reaches Jesus that Lazarus is seriously ill. Seriously ill must have been terrifying in the days before any kind of functioning medicine. No antibiotics, no germ theory, no surgery.**

**Martha and Mary get word to Jesus, who is travelling somewhere outside the area. Get yourself here with all speed, your good friend Lazarus desperately needs you!**

**And then, inexplicably, Jesus doesn't go.**

**He stays where he is, finishing off what he was doing for another couple of days. Then he sets off with some cryptic remarks about going to wake Lazarus up. But Lazarus wasn't sleeping. Lazarus had died, leaving Martha and Mary alone and vulnerable in a culture where single women didn't fare well. By the time Jesus has travelled back to Judea, Lazarus had already been dead for 4 days.**

**As Jesus approached, Martha, and then Mary, went out to meet him. They both say the same thing, the question we all want to ask in these situations. "Where the hell have you been??! If you'd only been here then he wouldn't have died!"**

**Some close family friends lost a baby to cot death. Lauren discovered him in his cot, blue and with his heart no longer beating. He was still warm though. They did as much as they could with CPR and stuff, but Lauren was praying and praying. She was sure that because he was still warm, and the fact they were missionaries, sacrificing everything to do the Lord's work that God would bring him back. But he didn't. They**

lost their little boy and it took Lauren a very long time to come to terms with the fact that when she had screamed for help, God hadn't showed up.

In our gospel reading, after Martha and Mary had asked Jesus "Why?!", something unbelievably important happened. Jesus's response has massive ramifications for us.

John's gospel says: "When Jesus saw her crying, and the Jews who came with her also crying, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, 'Where have you laid him?' They said to him, 'Lord, come and see.' Jesus too began to cry."

It's hard to understate the impact of this. The God whom Christians worship is not a remote and aloof "sky god" somewhere way out there. No, He's a tender God who is deeply moved, even grieved, by anything and everything that threatens our human well-being. Jesus lived as a human, feeling and experiencing all the same stuff that we go through.

I've used this quote before in a sermon, but I'd like to bring it out again because it sums up what this is all about. It was written by someone on an internet forum that I frequent and they too were going through a rough time:

"God shared our human nature and experienced all the brokenness, estrangement and isolation I have felt at various times in my life.

So even when I am at my lowest, when I feel like no one understands the pain I am going through, God is there. God has experienced it. Rather than feeling further condemned by God for being human, having flaws and having those low moments, I feel closer to God because we have had a shared experience, and at those moments I feel God's healing presence.

That is what the Incarnation means to me."

So now on to the tricky bit. What does this mean for us, sitting here listening? What are we going to take with us, out the church doors to the other people living with us in God's world?

I don't want to pretend that I have any answers, because I don't. I think death, illness, pain, sorrow, anxiety and grief suck as much as you do. I wish they weren't part of our world. But they are.

But there are a few things we have going for us.

Firstly, we worship a God who understands our pain and suffering. A God who has experienced it first-hand the way we experience it. God understands our situation.

As Dylan Breuer puts it on her blog:

"So they called to Jesus, calling on him as one who loves Lazarus, and challenging Jesus to behave in a manner in keeping with that love. Jesus doesn't come. He doesn't come to be with his beloved friend as he lies dying, and he doesn't come to honor his friend by being present at his funeral.

**When the sisters get word that Jesus is finally on his way, Martha impetuously and angrily runs out to meet him -- conduct that would have been seen as scandalous, or even dangerous for a woman alone. She runs at Jesus with the depths of her grief and anger.**

**If nothing else, her situation proves that being faithful to Jesus is in no way a guarantee against pain and tragedy. There is no one on earth whose righteousness, wisdom, hard work, or good planning will preserve her from seeing the depths that Martha sees. Good people become widows and orphans. It's a fact, and no less of a fact for Jesus' coming.**

**But there is something else. We can cry to God from the depths.**

**There is no depth, no loss, no tragedy, no disease or death, nothing on heaven or on earth or under the earth that can place the world or anyone in it beyond God's redemption. Good people become widows and orphans, but God defends the widow and the orphan, and will not leave those God loves bereft."**

**We also know that the Lazarus story didn't end there. Jesus called him out of his tomb, in the same way he lifted the Psalm writer out of the pit and turned their mourning into dancing. He'll get us up out of our own metaphorical tombs too.**

**On a practical note these things can be helpful if you yourself are presently spending time at the bottom of the pit:**

**Understand that we all behave differently when we're under extreme stress or experiencing grief. You can't really do it wrong, so don't be too hard on yourself if you find you're behaving differently from normal.**

**Find ways to distract yourself if you need to. But not too much. You need to give yourself permission to mourn too. Cry if you need to, especially if you're a bloke. I was told as a kid that I shouldn't cry so I could be strong for my Mum. That's terrible advice!!**

**Look after yourself physically. Get lots of rest, and make sure you keep eating. It's so easy to neglect your physical body while you're fighting a mental battle. Tough times are very physically tiring!**

**And for God's sake, ask others for help. If you need to talk, talk. If you need to just sit and distract yourself with chat about other things, do that. Find some people you love and trust and ask them specifically for whatever you need. Loads of us are happy to cook for you, mow your lawn or collect your kids from school. I know I am. Just ask!**

**Use the prayer chain. People all over the Tasman District will start praying for you at the drop of a hat. Talk to Susan if you need intensive prayer and she'll engage the network. There are normally people around after a church service who will only be too happy to pray with you too. Don't be scared to ask!**

**But the most important thing to remember is that nothing lasts forever! With the help and support of friends, and medical intervention if you need it, you can come out the**

**other side. While it doesn't feel possible at the time, you will be able to feel joy again. You will be able to praise God.**

**You might be left with a permanent mental limp and a scar or two, but joy really does come in the morning. I have experienced it myself, that gradual dawn.**

**Psalm 30 is a thanksgiving Psalm, remember.**

**The Psalm has been written by someone looking back on a dark time in their life, and yet they are able to praise God. But the praises of the psalms don't stem from naïve delusions about life. They come right out of the depth of pain and suffering. The difference is that they look at that pain and suffering from a different perspective. The Psalms of praise reflect the joy of things turning out OK — or at least the joy of the hope of things turning out OK. They reflect the faith and the hope that we have — that wherever we are, whatever our circumstances, we are constantly surrounded by God's love.**

**Being surrounded by God's love can mean many things to many people. It can mean a feeling of calmness, or a feeling of not being alone. And it does mean those things. But look around you. I firmly believe that we're surrounded by God's love at the moment, in the form of the people around us. We can help each other through the dark times.**

**Again, on a practical note, if someone you know is suffering and you're currently at a loss to assist, Kiwi author Joy Cowley wrote this psalm that sums up perfectly how to support a suffering friend:**

**"Good on you, Friend,  
for being a presence of Christ to me.  
You came when I needed you  
I didn't have to ask. You didn't have to say.  
You just turned up out of the blue,  
carrying no luggage,  
both hands free to carry mine,  
and somehow, you made it look  
as though I was doing you a favour,  
letting you be there.**

**It beats me how you knew what a burden I was bearing.  
You know, I can't believe that I talked so much  
or that you could be attentive for such a long time.  
But I do know that when I left you,  
the sun was shining  
and there was a beautiful day waiting to be used.**

**So good on you, friend, for being there, and letting me tell my story,  
and for giving to me three ways  
as a friend  
as a teacher of what friendship is all about  
and as a channel of something that I call holiness."**

**And so we come to the end of this sermon, but hopefully not the end of our thinking and mulling this stuff over.**

**I can't promise you a life free from pain and suffering. Being a Christian certainly doesn't make us immune. God makes no such promises. But, the promise of the story of Lazarus is that, like Lazarus, Jesus loves us. He weeps for us. He is deeply moved by us. And he brings life to our death, freedom to our bondage, and a shining light to our every darkness.**

**Tears may flow in the night, but there WILL BE joy in the morning.**

**Let's pray:**

**I don't intend it to happen.  
It just sneaks up on me  
and before I know it  
there's been a kind of death,  
part of me wrapped in a shroud  
and buried in a tomb  
while the rest of me stands by  
wondering why the light has gone out.  
Then you, my Friend, all knowing,  
seek me out and knock  
at the edge of my heart,  
calling me to come forth.  
I argue that I can't.  
Death is death and I'm too far gone  
for story book miracles.  
But you keep on calling,  
"Come forth! Come forth!"  
and the darkness is pierced  
by a shaft of light  
as the stone begins to move.**

**My Friend,  
I don't know how you do it  
but the tomb has become  
as bright as day, as bright as love,  
and life has returned.**

**Look at me!  
I'm running out,  
dropping bandages all over the place**

**Amen**