

‘Above Earth’s Lamentation’  
Rev. Dr. Ann C. Kemper  
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based on John 10:1-10

Please pray with me:

Holy and awesome God, we come before you this morning approaching the gate to your kingdom. We celebrate how Jesus is our good shepherd and who stands at the gate between your realm and ours.

Jesus calls us by name ... just as you called Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Moses and Miriam.

Open our hearts to hear your call. Open our minds to receive your word. Open the doors of our very building so that we may be both givers and receivers of your love.

In Jesus’ loving name we pray. Amen.

I’m attending a memorial service this afternoon for a good friend. Clyde was one of those friends I never knew I treasured so much until it was too late to tell him.

Whenever I think back to times I struggled or was sad or wrestled with life ... it always seemed like Clyde was there. Clyde in his gentle ways helped me through some tough times.

Clyde was one of those people who could see people’s pain and want to help.

I imagine we will hear many stories like mine this afternoon when we celebrate his life.

Reflecting on Clyde’s life has made me aware of ways I can be Clyde to others. To keep his memory and devotion to people alive; even after he is gone.

Yesterday we said goodbye to another dear Covenant member: Marge Writz. In celebrating her life yesterday it was apparent a good way to keep Marge’s memory alive is to consider how to be more loving in all we say and do.

The one common denominator in both Clyde and Marge’s lives were their innate ability to reflect Jesus.

Clyde in his gentle ways; Marge in her inclusive love. Marge wanted to love everyone.

I have no doubt both Clyde and Marge had times in their lives when they felt discouraged and overwhelmed. I can’t imagine what that day must have been like when Clyde learned he had a rare form of cancer.

I also can’t imagine the day when Marge found out her older brother had been killed in World War II ... and her subsequent decision to enlistment in the Marines.

These kinds of lamentations in life are common ... and yet how we deal with the challenges, sadness and pain is as individual as you and I. We each receive, process, and live with the stresses of life as we are each individually able.

I have often wondered how people who claim not to have faith, or do not know the love and support of a church family ... how do they endure earth’s lamentations?

No one goes through life unscathed by trial and tribulation. Some seem to suffer more than others, but no one is immune from laments in life.

Apostle Paul knew suffering from both a physical and spiritual perspective. He tried to support those early disciples in transforming suffering into a form of solidarity with Christ. To those Romans being brutally persecuted for their faith Paul offered them this prayerful encouragement:

“We throw open our doors to God and discover at the same moment that God has already thrown open God’s door to us. We find ourselves standing where we always hoped we might stand – out in the wide open pastures of God’s grace and glory, standing tall and shouting our praise.”

“There’s more! We continue to shout our praise even when we’re hemmed in with troubles, because we know how troubles can develop passionate patience in us, and how that patience in turn forges the tempered steel of virtue, keeping us alert for whatever God will do next. In alert expectancy such as this (suffering), we’re never left feeling shortchanged. Quite the contrary – we can’t round up enough containers to hold everything God generously pours into our hearts through the Holy Spirit.”

[For those who may recognize this sentiment it’s a paraphrased from Romans 5.]

You will never, ever hear me preach the sentiment that when we are faced with great challenge and sadness God wants us to suffer so we can learn how to be patient.

Rather ... you will hear me preach that in times of stress and lament, God is there for us, calling us each by name, comforting and guiding and leading us with the kind of peace that fills us in abundance.

Does that kind of love cure cancer or keep a 94 year old woman alive forever? No!

But that kind of love does keep us from collapsing under the sadness of lament and loss and giving up on life. That kind of love encourages us to celebrate life and to do good in life.

I’ve often thought that perhaps the reason interest and commitment to church these days is because suffering is misunderstood. Far too many times I hear language that accuses God of somehow manipulating bad things happening. If that kind of theology is expressed too often, the church gets convicted of preaching divine manipulation and not divine grace.

I’ve also heard comments like, “God needed more angels.” in order to justify the loss of a child or loved one.

No! Please don’t say things like that!

God doesn’t want more angels! In times of trial and sadness God’s heart is broken in solidarity with ours helping to bring comfort and healing to those who grieve.

When William Sloane Coffin’s son died in a car accident at a young age he wept bitterly for the loss. Not because he blamed God, but because wracking tears were his way of negotiating earth’s greatest lamentations.

He knew God wept too. William Sloane Coffin knew Jesus stood at the gate calling his son’s name; loving them both into the fold of God’s love.

That kind of faith is what lifts us above earth's lamentations. We are able to sing ... not because our hearts are filled with joy, but because our hearts are filled with the melody of lute and lyre when we praise God who promises to never leave us orphaned.

The most gentle image of our Savior is as a shepherd. Our most beloved and comforting psalm is about the shepherd image of Jesus leading us beside still waters; restoring our souls; and offering us such an abundance of comfort our cup runneth over.

Faith isn't a test of endurance.

Faith is the assurance of divine love that says:

In life, in death, in life beyond death ... God is with us. We are not alone.

Thanks be to God. Amen.