

We are generally not very good, as a society, we're not very good at creating space for grief. Our culture does not allow very much room for loss. No – ancient near eastern cultures were much better at grieving than we are. Have you ever wondered where you could go with your grief, or who you could turn to – after the funeral - when it seems that everyone expects you just to go on living? Then you should appreciate the old world practices that externalized the internal emotions of grief – from professional mourners (women who made a living wailing and dramatizing grief) to very public expressions, expressions that say to the world, "my world has come to an end. I cannot go on the same way today as yesterday. Everything stops for me and I sit here on my ash-heap, I sit in sackcloth. I cry, I feel despair, I feel the pain of loss. See my pain. See my loss" – these expressions of grief say. We are not very good at creating space for grief, but today, today we try to honour loss, we try to make some space to share with one another and with God the pain and difficulty that is in our hearts and in our lives.

Walter Wangerin Jr. writes this: "Death doesn't wait till the ends of our lives to meet us and to make an end. Instead, we die a hundred times before we die; and all the little endings on the way are like a slowly growing echo of the final BANG! Before that bang takes place. It's like turning the record backward. Each lesser echo, each little death, has not only its own immediate sorrow; it draws fear and horror from the absoluteness of the last end, the real slamming of the door, the mortal and eternal BANG!"¹

"She comes in a hundred forms. Abuse is one such form. Divorce is another. The division of children and parents, by wounding or by the merest neglect or even by the natural independence of teenager-hood is a third... Sheer, fearsome anonymity is a fourth. Self despising and despair and the cruelty of human loneliness and suicide, even in the contemplation of suicide, suicide by any means, emotional and physical – these are her forms. Did I say there were a hundred? She comes as variously as humans have both the imagination and the sin to

¹ Wangerin, Walter Jr. Mourning into Dancing. p. 26.

accomplish the evil of their hearts. But her collective name is singular and familiar, even for those who would deny her. Her name is death."²

All the losses in our lives, from the great separation from loved ones who have passed on, to the loss of hoped for expectations in a new community, all the deaths in our lives show the stages of grief to various levels – the shock and denial, anger and resistance, the eventual despair. The loss of relationship, of the roles we play, of self (and self-understanding) – this is the loss that is felt when someone turns from 29 to 30 for example – no longer in your twenties your understanding of your self must change and shifts and letting go of the old, letting go of your twenties, or thirties, or forties - is a loss. Loss comes in the form of displacement, betrayal of trust, divorce, the death of a loved one. It comes as natural disasters, as the futility of labour, it comes as the broken body, limited and limiting. It comes as the death of hopes and dreams, it comes as failure, it comes as guilt, it comes as dying, in its many forms.

² Wangerin, Walter Jr. Mourning into Dancing. p. 22.

Today we make space and take time to acknowledge the deaths in our lives, to mark our losses, to allow ourselves to feel their emotion. There are a number of responses to grief in Hebrew Scriptures – and a special thank you to Karen Thiessen for this information – consider these expressions of grief:

From the book of Daniel: "So I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes."³

From 2 Samuel "Tamar put ashes on her head and tore the ornamented robe she was wearing. She put her hand on her head and went away, weeping aloud as she went."⁴

From Ezra "When I heard this, I tore my tunic and cloak, pulled hair from my head and beard and sat down appalled."⁵

In Genesis Reuben & Jacob mourn Joseph by tearing their garments and Jacob dons sackcloth⁶

From Joshua 7:6 "Then Joshua tore his clothes and fell facedown to the ground ...remaining there till evening. The elders of Israel did the same, and sprinkled dust on their heads."⁷

³ Daniel 9:3

⁴ 2 Samuel 13:19

⁵ Ezra 9:3

⁶ Genesis 37:29, 34

⁷ Joshua 7:6

From Esther "When Mordecai learned of all that had been done, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the city, wailing loudly and bitterly."⁸

And from Job "At this, Job got up and tore his robe and shaved his head."⁹ And again "When [Job's friends] saw him from a distance, they could hardly recognize him; they began to weep aloud, and they tore their robes and sprinkled dust on their heads."¹⁰

Once again, Karen points out, "Sackcloth was coarse and uncomfortable and wearing it was a sign of mourning. To tear clothes was a sign of distress and extreme grief. Cloth was hand-woven in those days. It took time to harvest, prepare, and dye the materials, to spin the fibre and weave the cloth. There were no Wal-mart or over-stocked thrift shops. Once the cloth was woven, it had to be hand-sewn to make clothing. There were no sewing machines. Even the thread with which clothes were sewn had to be hand spun. Wardrobes for the average person were very small. Cloth and clothing were valuable [an investment of sorts] so to tear one's clothing was a significant act of sacrifice."

We bring our grief and loss, great and small today. We rend our clothing and sit on the ash-heap. We remember the past

⁸ Esther 4:1

⁹ Job 1:20

¹⁰ Job 2:12

year, the people who have been near and dear to us who have died, but we bring here also older, deep-seated losses, knowing that grief works by no calendar. You may carry a loss from years ago – you are invited to set it here. You may carry a loss from decades ago – you are invited to set it here. Yours may not seem so great or dramatic, but if you feel it, then it is a loss, and you are invited to set it here.

We're going to take a few minutes – actually, we're going to take as long as you need – to hang strips of torn cloth on the tree here in the centre of the sanctuary – setting them here, releasing them. Please feel free to approach the table and take a piece of cloth and hang it on the tree. Take as long as you need for this act of grief, this act of prayer, this act of hope.

You are invited to bring your loss, your pain and disappointment, you are invited to come and place it on the tree. Please, come.

These, O Lord are our losses – you see these, and the losses we are afraid to give voice to, you see those and the losses that we aren't even aware we carry with us, you see them all Lord. You see them and you honour them.

We bring our loss and our grief here for the same reason a child turns to his or her parents when something goes wrong. We bring it here, we leave it here, why? To have it fixed. Sure, if fixing can be done. But if fixing can't be done (as we know it cannot always be) then why do we air out our pain and our loss this morning? Why does a child who has stumbled headlong turn for Mommy or Daddy? A child, running along full-tilt, then whump, down they go – skinned knees and scraped hands – a momentary silence and then a shocked wail. Why does that child reach up their arms imploringly, tears streaming down their red blotchy face? We bring it here because we have to bring it somewhere – the pain, the anger, the despair – it has to go somewhere – so we bring it here. It's better to bring our anger to God than to take it out on those around us, or on ourselves – it's better to rail at God because, God can take it. God is asking

for it. God can take our anger and our pain and our despair. So we bring it here because we have to bring it somewhere and we bring it here to see that someone acknowledges our loss.

We bring it here to see that someone cares, that someone has noticed that we hurt. We come, tears streaming down our red blotchy face, our arms outstretched imploringly, because we hope to be picked up and held and consoled. We want a parent to stroke our hair and say, "husssh, husssh, it will be okay." We long to hear Christ say, "Peace, fear not".

Here in this place we witness to death **and** resurrection. We witness to hope and possibility even in the midst of grief and loss. I'll leave you with this word, not my word but God's word spoken through scripture, God's word spoken through Christ, God's word spoken from the cross – when God tore his own garment and the temple veil was rent in two – Yes God notices our loss and our pain and this is his word through Christ into our loss – maybe you should close your eyes so you can hear God's word – and God says, "Peace, Fear Not – shhhh, shhhh, it'll be okay. I know it hurts, but I'm here, I'm with you. It'll be okay."