

Finding Hope Amidst Grief

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Abram said, "Eternal Lord, what could You possibly give to me that would make that much of a difference in my life? After all, I am still childless, and Eliezer of Damascus stands to inherit all I own. Since You have not given me the gift of children, my only heir will be one of the servants born in my household." [...] Abram believed God and trusted in His promises, so God counted it to his favor as righteousness. (Genesis 15:2-3, 6)

Jesus said, "Don't just talk of turning to God; you'd better bear the authentic fruit of a changed life. Don't take pride in your religious heritage, saying, 'We have Abraham for our father!' Listen—God could turn these rocks into children of Abraham!" (Luke 3:8)

One of the things that I've learned over the past few years, especially through the Fire and Water program, is that we human beings refuse to grieve. We even created a myth to support the ways that we run away from our grief, so that we can stay in denial. The myth says, "We all grieve differently." That's not correct. Grief is grief is grief. The truth is that we we all avoid *feeling* our grief differently. We all deny our feelings of grief in different ways. Even me.

It wasn't until I slowed down, just a bit, to be on the virtual retreat at the beginning of the month that there was finally space for my grief to flow. Grief about EVERYTHING that has happened and IS happening since March. As soon as that grief was free from all the walls I had built up around it, it began to flow and flow and flow. Even now. Even in this moment, my grief is floating on top of my emotions and can spill over in a moment.

“Isn't that painful?” you might ask. No, it's far less painful than trying to keep it from flowing. Yes, I find that tears of sorrow flow with much more ease, but so does laughter, and sighs of delight, and exclamations of awe. That's the thing about walling off our grief – we end up walling off and deadening ALL of our emotions. We cannot pick and choose which emotions we want to feel. We either choose to let our emotions flow freely, or we block them all off and feel nothing.

When we block off our emotions, we also block off our deep connections to one another and to God. When someone asks you, “How are you doing?” and your response is, “Oh I'm fine.

Everything's fine" you're adding bricks to your wall. In this season of COVID, there's a new version of that. When someone asks, "How are you doing?" the new response is "I'm hanging in there."

That response signals to the other person that you do not want to talk about your grief or any of the rest of the emotions you might be feeling in that moment. And it also cuts off the chance to connect deeper with that person; it cuts off the chance for either person to find a moment of healing and release.

The next time someone asks you "how you are doing," my invitation is that you be open and honest about everything you're feeling in that moment. I'll show you what I mean: Would you all ask me, with one voice, "How are you doing, Pastor Emilia?" [pause]

Thank you for asking. I'm sad. I'm deeply saddened by all of the pain that our country is feeling and by the pain that the world is feeling. And I'm grateful for this beautiful, clear, autumn day. And my heart is full of joy to be with you all this morning, in the safest

way possible right now.

Sadness. Gratitude. Joy. They don't cancel each other out. They flow together. They don't negate one another. They are interwoven; they are the tapestry of emotions that I am feeling in this moment.

And so my invitation stands – when someone asks you “how are you doing?” I encourage you to be brave and share your emotional tapestry to the person asking. And, when YOU ask someone else, “how are you doing?” be ready to witness the emotional tapestry of the person you are asking. Don't listen to speak, but rather listen to understand. Give one another space to share the intricacy of the tapestry you are each holding.

So, what does this have to do with our scripture passage this morning? Well... Abram and Sarai were in deep denial of their grief. How do I know? Because the scriptures tell us that they kept trying to make God's promises come true through their human hands.

Including forcing the Egyptian woman, Hagar, who was enslaved in

their household, to marry and mate with Abram.

Rather than share with God – and each other - how much they were grieving the loss of their homeland, and their family, and the fact that Sarai still hadn't become pregnant, despite God's promise of a child between them, they hid behind their words about “turning to God.” When in reality they were taking things into their own hands, because they weren't satisfied with the timeline that God was operating on.

Because the longer things were taking to come to fruition, the harder it became to hold back their grief. When we hold back and deny our grief – that's when we end up doing things that separate us from God. For me, that looks like buying things I don't need, eating foods my body doesn't need, and binging on TV shows and movies. What does the denial of grief look like in your life?

God finally breaks through to Abram in a vision and in that timeless, Kairos space Abram finally allows the walls around his emotions to come down and his grief to flow: *“Eternal Lord, what could You*

possibly give to me that would make that much of a difference in my life? After all, I am still childless, and Eliezer of Damascus stands to inherit all I own. Since You have not given me the gift of children, my only heir will be one of the servants born in my household.”

So much grief needed to flow. And then – and this is important – please note that God didn't leave or grow angry with Abram for releasing his grief. Rather, God swiftly came closer and brought him – outside – to a place of beauty, and reassured him.

Abram's renewed trust in God, and renewed hope in God's promises was ONLY possible after Abram allowed his grief to flow.

So let your emotions flow, Beloved in Christ, for it is only when we wall them off that we run the risk of drowning in those same emotions and doing things that we regret. When we let them flow, God can and will carry us in the emotional current, pointing out all of the reasons to hope, which keep us afloat. Amen.