

I read an article a few weeks ago in which the author wrote that the church needs to be more welcoming of tears, because, for a while, the mindset was that you bring your very best self into the sanctuary: from the clothes you wear to the behavior of children to the cynical attitudes and negative thoughts. Leave all of that, including the tears, those visible signs of weakness at the door. Now we may not have said such things out loud, or even printed them in the bulletin fine-print, but we did our fair share of enforcement in the pews with long drawn-out stares before gossip whispers and pointed fingers. We wanted to maintain a certain level of holiness, or something like that, after all. This was *God's* house, and we had better treat it with the utmost care and staunchest respect.

I didn't get that message right off the bat, so I've been told, at least. My shrieking cries amongst the pews, during my younger years, might have lead me to spend more time in the nursery than in the sanctuary. But I still remember years later, when I was more than old enough to have gotten the message that tears are not always openly welcomed or encouraged by the church-going masses: it was after my sister's wedding, in fact, during which I was supposed to sing the Lord's Prayer as a solo. The only problem was I skipped an entire line of it; probably not a good sign for a future pastor and

all. And not exactly the best piece to try to fool an audience, because the overwhelming majority of the church-going masses, even the ones who show up just to weddings and funerals; they know the words to the Lord's Prayer by heart, if nothing else. Nevertheless, that was the prayer I was supposed to sing, and that was the prayer I messed up on for everyone to see.

So, after the service I was up in the balcony, crying. Not sure exactly why: embarrassment, shame, disappointment that I did it during my sister's wedding...maybe all the above and then some. Regardless, the tears came, without any advanced notice. They just showed up, as if to reveal some deeper combination of emotions that I hadn't realized I was experiencing at the time, and couldn't put into words whatsoever, either. So, come to think of it, if we cannot do such a thing in a sanctuary, what is the point of calling it a sanctuary anyway?

This John the Baptist story is not the most uplifting passage in all of Scripture, to say the least, and yet, it is absolutely imperative that we hear it; not just to get our attention, or make us realize that there is no such thing as the "good 'ole days" when no blood-thirsty violence existed whatsoever. But such a story is the needed reminder that the Scriptures contain the entire spectrum of the human condition, including plenty of debilitating sadness,

overwhelming fear, gut-wrenching pain, absolute horror, and plenty more to go along with it. Yes, this is ultimately meant to be not just *Good News*, but the *Greatest News* of all time. Nevertheless, what makes it so incredibly great is that it shows up to the scene of all this misery and all this shock; that, evidently, there is absolutely nowhere, no dreaded part of our humanity, that is beyond the reach of God.

So, hopefully, gone are the days when the expectation of the perfect sanctuary was suit and ties, and sitting up straight, and not a peep at all except from the esteemed pastor up-front, and no tears streaming down, of course. No sign of weakness, as if we thought that meant there was not enough faith in that person, not enough trust in God, not enough perfect Christian in them. Hopefully those days are long gone, because this is meant to be a sanctuary, not just for those of us coming in here after a long streak of good days filled with good news; this is also a sanctuary for those who could not have possibly imagined any worse than the pile of horribleness from this past week or longer.

Yes, tears are more than welcomed in this room: tears over horrible stories in Scripture, and the eerie reminder that such things still happen today. Tears over other current events that makes us feel that we're in this downward

spiral with no end in sight. Tears over loss of loved ones or broken family relationships. Tears over just the right hymn tune to take us back in time to those people we cherish. Tears over mistakes made that we desperately wish we could somehow go back and correct. No limits. And no more stares, no shameful looks, because this is the sanctuary where God goes to work as the God of the cross: the God in Jesus Christ weeping, the God of enduring the suffering because there's, evidently, no place in the human condition beyond the reach of holy transformational hope.

The tears are more than welcome to come streaming down, because this God sends the Savior to help wipe them away with the Greatest News of all time: that nothing that happens in this life, nothing that this world in its fair share of evil can unleash upon us, absolutely nothing will ever separate us from the love of God, that not even death stood a chance against. The Greatest News, that brings tears of overwhelming joy as well, is still just as true today, and it will never ever be taken away from us. And for that, we most certainly give thanks to God indeed! Amen.