

A Time to Grow: Famine

April 16, 2022

Wenksville United Methodist Church

Mark 15:42-47

Well, friends, we are finally here. On the *very last day* of this year's Lenten season. For those of you who have been journeying through Lent with us these last 6 weeks, we have been through quite a journey together, exploring the joys and the sorrows and the delights and the struggles of our spiritual lives, and using as our model the image of a garden. And along the way, we have discovered that our souls need the same amount of care and tending and intentional preparation and cultivation as the plants that we put in the ground and faithfully tend.

Today, as we enter into our penultimate sermon in this series (we will wrap it up tomorrow morning on a high note), we are going to be continuing a trajectory that we started a couple of weeks ago, in talking about what happens within our souls *when things go wrong*.

And as we sit here tonight, on this Holy Saturday – this weird, awkward night that is sandwiched right between the brutal pain of Good Friday and the unspeakable joy of Easter – we are sitting, holding all of the unfinished pieces of the story of God's self-sacrificial love, and painfully aware that at this point in our story, things have, indeed, gone *wrong*.

Reading the story of Jesus's burial reminds me a bit of a book that I am reading right now with Julia.

Last Christmas, Julia was given an heirloom copy of several of the *Little House* books by Laura Ingalls Wilder. *Little House in the Big Woods* and *Little House on the Prairie* and a few others. I remember my mom reading these books to me when I was a little girl, and I am absolutely delighting in rediscovering them as an adult, as I read them to my daughter.

For those of you who have never read the books, or watched the old spinoff TV show, they are a series of autobiographical novels about a pioneer family in the mid-to-late 1800s, during the years of westward expansion. The family consisted of Pa and Ma, and three girls: Mary, Laura, and Carrie.

In the book that we are reading now – the fourth book in the series, titled *On the Banks of Plum Creek*, the family moves from Kansas to Minnesota, buys a plot of land that they build the house of their dreams on. To pay for the house, Pa plants a huge wheat crop that he lovingly tends for months and months. As the wheat grows taller and taller,

every time the family hits a rough patch (which happens a lot), Pa unfailingly reminds them, “just wait until the wheat is harvested. Then the house will be paid for and I will get new boots to replace my boots with holes in them, and we will have enough money to live on for a long time.”

But one day, just as Pa is getting ready to harvest his beautiful and bountiful crop of wheat, something happens. The sun goes dark. Literally. It is as if there is a cloud that is blocking the sun, casting a weird, eerie shade over the whole countryside. But it isn't a cloud. It is, in fact, a plague of millions and millions of grasshoppers. In one enormous swarm, the grasshoppers descend from the sky and cover everything, eating and gnawing on everything in sight. Within minutes, the grass was gone. After several hours, the willow trees by the creek were completely bare. And within a few days, there was nothing left of Pa's wheatfield.

All that remained were a house that he now had no way to pay for, a pair of old boots that he had torn holes right through, two horses and a cow that now had no grass and barely any hay to eat, and a terrified family who wondered how in the world they were going to survive.

I have to think that in the minutes...the hours...the days following the crucifixion, those who considered themselves followers of Jesus had to have been feeling much the same way.

In truth, we actually don't know much at all about what was going on with the disciples in the days immediately following Jesus' death. Matthew's gospel tells us that the moment Jesus was arrested, his disciples deserted him and fled, and the next time we hear anything about any of them, Peter is denying ever having known him, and Judas is ending his own life.

And in our story tonight, the whole cast of characters changes. The people who we would have expected to have been there with Jesus through to the end are conspicuously absent. But we see some surprising people come out of the woodwork in these critical moments. We have a Roman Centurion – a high-ranking member of the Roman guard – likely one of the executioners, who looks at Jesus as he breaths his last and in that moment he *gets it*. “Truly this man was God's Son!” he says.

We have the women. Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, Salome, and a variety of other, unnamed women. The people who go through all of the gospel stories following Jesus but almost never get a mention because women really weren't *that* important, after all.

We have Joseph of Arimathea, a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin – the Jewish ruling council who had together voted to bring Jesus up on charges. And this Pharisee,

who we now discover had been living a life of discipleship in secret, decides to “out” himself and petitions Pilate for Jesus’s body.

And we have Pilate. The cowardly ruler who knew that Jesus was innocent but who did not want to make the Jewish rulers mad, and so he gave them what they wanted even if every bit of his conscience was screaming in protest. Even though he could not take back what he had done, he does make one final decision of mercy, and allows that Jesus’s may be taken down from the cross and given a proper burial. That itself was a big no-no and could have gotten him into some hot water with the powers-that-be...but it allows him to show that there is at least some tiny little dose of humanity inside him after all.

So while all of this is taking place...while the unnamed and overlooked women are turning into bold, empowered disciples and evangelists; while Pharisees are outing themselves as disciples; while executioners are declaring Jesus’s lordship; while kings are falling on their faces and regretting their biggest mistakes...as the whole world is beginning to turn upside-down, one person at a time, it begs the question: where in the world are the disciples?

We have *no idea*.

Here’s what we do know: Just days earlier, they were making plans for Jesus to stage a coup against the government and take his rightful place as king. It didn’t matter to them that Jesus wasn’t on-board with that idea. *They* believed it, with their whole hearts. They just *knew* that that was the next logical step for Jesus. When they looked into the future, they saw palaces and wealth and prosperity and freedom.

For them, every single sign pointed to that. Every time Jesus performed a miracle; every time Jesus got out of a sticky situation with a witty turn of phrase; every time Jesus commanded an audience of thousands – that just solidified in their minds that Jesus was going to be their next and greatest king, put on the throne by God himself.

For them, dreaming about a future free of Roman rule, would have been as thrilling as a pioneer family dreaming of a paid-for home and enough money to buy all the clothes and shoes and treats they could ever want. Or like an Israelite slave dreaming of a “land of our very own, flowing with milk and honey.”

And the disciples really believed – deeply – that their dream was about to be realized. Until the sun went dark. And a cloud of grasshoppers swooped down and devoured every one of their hopes and dreams. In an instant, and before any of them knew what was happening, their dream turned into a nightmare, and their whole world was shaken. They couldn’t see straight. They couldn’t walk straight. They were terrified, and when we are afraid, the thinking center of our brain goes offline and we enter into survival mode. Fight, flight, or freeze. And so the disciples fled.

Where to? Nobody knows.

I even kind-of doubt the disciples themselves knew where they were going.

Because they *had* nowhere to go.

All they could do is run. Try to outrun the terror...the grief...the pain...the shame...just go as far and as fast as they could, away from anybody who might see them or recognize them. Which was no easy feat, because as Peter quickly discovered, they were pretty well-known people in the public eye. People knew who they were. They were basically low-key celebrities by this point. So running wouldn't be easy. But nevertheless, they tried.

Friends, have you ever found yourself in a similar mind space? Maybe not reeling in the aftermath of a brutal crucifixion, or gazing over your prized wheatfield moments after the grasshoppers had devoured every last morsel...but in one of these "famine" seasons of life? Where you *thought* things would go one way, and you planned and prepared for things to go one way, you *knew* things would go one way...and then they just didn't. Or even worse, disaster strikes and you are left reeling in the aftermath, with absolutely zero clue what to do?

If you have one – or more – of these stories in your own life, you know what I am talking about. These are the stories that we would never wish upon our worst enemies. And yet, somehow, in the end, with lots and lots of time, these stories have a way of shaping our very identities. And sometimes, after a *lot* of time and healing work, they become the kinds of stories that we cherish.

Stories like my little sister's. When in her first year of marriage a wildfire tore through the town where she was living, and burned *everything* to the ground. She and her new husband lost *everything*.

Or stories like my friend Ann's. Ann was happily married with four young boys, when her husband was arrested and convicted on federal drug trafficking charges. With her husband incarcerated, her assets were frozen, she couldn't get a job, and she was even pushed out of her church and made to feel like a leper.

Or stories like my friend Barry's. Barry was one of my closest mentors and friends until Alzheimer's tragically took him from us a few years ago. But about 20 years ago, Barry and his wife got the call that their 18-year-old son had been tragically killed in a rock climbing accident, just two weeks before his high-school graduation.

Or stories like that of the refugee who has to flee from their home and their country. Or the person who steps into the doctor's office for a routine visit and then everything goes dark when the doctor utters that terrifying word "cancer." "Untreatable."

You probably have your own story that you can plug in here. A story of loss, a story of devastation, a story of that one time when everything in life changed *in an instant* and it was like the sun went dark. Like the veil of your soul was torn. Like your whole world was ripped apart by a giant earthquake that nobody but you could feel.

When these things happen, it is hard to be present; it's hard even know which direction is up, and which direction is down. The temptation – and the natural response – is to do what the disciples did: to flee. To go MIA. To check out for a time and to let a different cast of characters step in and carry the story for awhile.

Sometimes, the darkness can be so penetrating and so overwhelming and so disorienting that it feels like that's all there is, and all there will ever be.

But that's just what the darkness wants us to believe. Here's the truth. No matter what we have faced in life (and let's face it – we have all faced our fair share of stuff) – no matter how dark our hardest days get; no matter how far or where we might try to flee when life gets scary; no matter how MIA we might get, and how much we might sometimes long for someone else – anyone else – even a Pharisee or an executioner or a crooked king or some outsider women – to step in and take over our story for a little while so that we can finally get a break – no matter where we might find ourselves in these painful famine seasons of life, we have a God who knows where we are, even when we ourselves don't. A God who seeks us out, when we have lost our way. A God who pierces darkness; drives away the grasshoppers; brings rain once again into our fields; and restores us yet again to new and renewed life.

So my friends, let us live tonight, knowing and trusting that the darkness does not last forever. And on the other side of Holy Saturday is the empty tomb of Easter. And that, my friends, gives us reason to hope.