

Good Friday Reflection
April 19, 2019
Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler

Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. For thou art with me. Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.

These words always come to me when I take my dog, Lucy, for a walk on her favorite path, which happens to be the Madonna Cemetery, through the back entrance at the end of our block. Lucy is an old girl-- at almost 14 years old, she has already outlived her life expectancy as a German Shepherd mix. Whenever we turn left out of our house, she pulls hopefully towards the cemetery and has an extra spring in her step if I cross the street, since then she knows I have agreed with her suggestion.

But before we can get to the gate to the cemetery, Lucy and I have to jump up a concrete wall, which is as high as my knees. "Are you sure you can do this today?" I always ask Lucy, with uncertainty. She responds, "Don't worry. I got this," and with confidence makes a running leap. Confidence doesn't get Lucy as far as it once did. And so I always am prepared, with my hands behind her, because inevitably, no more than 80% of her body makes it up the wall, so I give her haunches a little shove to get her rump up there too.

We began the season of Lent telling you, "Remember mortal: you are dust, and to dust you shall return." In the cemetery, although there are grand monuments and tiny grave markers, some that often have flowers and some that were forgotten decades ago, I know that death is the great equalizer. It will belong to all of us. And to be honest, sometimes that terrifies me.

I can divide my life into two parts: the first part was when death felt like an abstract to me, an idea that I knew would happen, but something I had never had to hold or taste or fear in my youth. I had seen people die; I had accompanied both my grandmothers in their deaths, as well as sat alongside dying church members as their pastor. I had given loving prayers and preached the resurrection at many funerals.

And then my mom died in my arms, and that began the second part of my life, when I would fear death. She had been visiting me in Chicago when my baby was still one year old. We shared a wonderful week together. All was well until she had a sudden heart attack. As she was pulled into another world, so was I; it was like I was watching

myself going through the motions of someone experiencing her mother dying, and yet somehow I had to inhabit my own body and act, and move.

I began chest compressions, pumping air into her: my lips to her lips, trying to breathe life into the body that long ago bore my once-tiny frame, just as so much longer ago Yahweh Elohim gathered the dust of the ground and breathed into its nostrils the breath of life, so that the dust might become human, with a living soul.

But I am not God. I could return breath to her body, but I could not put life back in her soul. There have been times in my mind when I have punished myself. I was a lifeguard once. So I wonder, if I had been able to inhabit my body better in that moment, would I have performed CPR in a way that could have saved her?

But I could not save her. And, the doctors could not either, though they managed to artificially make her heart go on for another 3 hours. When they told me there was nothing more they could do for her, I asked them to let me into the room with her before they cut off the machines. As a pastor, I know the things that are wise, and loving, and caring to say. As a daughter, I needed to be the one who received wisdom, and love, and care from my mom. But despite this pull, I tried to inhabit my body again, and tell my mother the things I knew to be true: I told her I loved her. I thanked her for all the ways she tried to be a good mom. I told her not to be afraid, that God would continue the love and care my sister and I had given her there on earth. I kissed her, and I blessed her with the same blessing I give my daughter each night. Her soul was already probably about 80% gone to be with God already. I gave that last 20% a loving push on, and then she was gone.

My mourning over my mom took quite a while, and still goes on today. Although I was already a pastor, who preached the good news of God's love continuing beyond the grave, I mourned. It was the ordinary caretaking of my young daughter that helped to pull me out of the pit. I was still nursing her, and it was that action that redeemed my body as something that could give life. Though my breath could not put the life back into my mother, my milk had the power to put life into my daughter.

This is my body, given for you. Jesus' eucharistic sharing suddenly had new meaning to me.

I watched her grow, and saw her face start to reflect the smile my mother once had. This do in remembrance of me.

There was a feeling that grew within me: an absolute joy I had, which comes from being the mother to this amazing human creature. It dawned on me that I was able to give my mother that joy as well. I never understood that feeling until I had my own child. And that is a way my mother lives again today, when my love for my daughter ignites joy in me.

It gives me courage that Jesus is no stranger to death, because it is a frightening and lonely place to be, I need Jesus there with me, offering his wisdom, and love, and care. Jesus can give that. But that is not all he gives.

Somehow, Jesus took the wrappings of death: cross and tomb, and not only that, but the powers that would seek to destroy. He took these with his body into the grave, and he made something new. Life. Using his body, he showed us that love is stronger than hate. Life can emerge from death. The world, in all its sinfulness, is not beyond God's redemption. Loving us like a mother, he puts joy on our faces-- even after pain and despair-- a joy that is a reflection of God's joy for what God has created.