

December 21, 2022
The Longest Night Homily
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www.stdavidsrva.org (Click on Streamed Worship)

Good evening. Tonight is a tender time. It is the darkest night in what might be the darkest time of the year for you or for a loved one. Many of us are experiencing grief of one kind or another during a time when others are celebrating and filled with good cheer. We are grateful for this time to be together, to acknowledge our feelings and to hold one another in prayer.

I know that grief is more than a feeling. Grief is a journey that can take over your life and lead you to places you never imagined. While on the journey you may become someone that you don't recognize. Grief can separate you from family and friends. Grief can render you useless for doing your job, taking care of yourself or taking care of your family. Grief is a painful journey that can take you away from the ONE who can bring you hope for a brighter tomorrow.

My grief journey began 10 years ago when my ex-husband Mike died suddenly of a heart attack at age 48. I was overcome with sadness for my boys. I hated that they would carry the wound of losing their father at a young age with them for the rest of their lives. I was hurt by well-meaning friends who insisted that Mike's death was "part of God's plan." I was angry with God. Eventually, my grief journey led me to a place where I believed that God was responsible for the loss my children were experiencing and I didn't want anything to do with a God that could cause that much sadness

and pain. I wanted nothing to do with God, with church, with scripture or with prayer. I turned my back on God and my faith.

Have you ever wanted to turn your back on God? I wonder if Joseph felt like turning his back on God. First the woman that he was engaged to tells him that she is pregnant (*Why would God let this happen - imagine Joseph's pain thinking that Mary had been unfaithful to him*) and then Joseph is told by an angel in a dream that the child Mary is carrying was conceived by the Holy Spirit (*Are you kidding, God? You couldn't have waited until AFTER we were married so she and I both don't look like sinners or fools?*) Joseph had good reason to be angry - he was being asked to deal with a lot of confusion and pain.

In the months before Jesus' birth did Joseph ever think to himself, *I can't do this, this isn't the marriage I was hoping for, this is not the life that I imagined, and I can't believe in a God who would ask this of me.*

We will never know if Joseph had these thoughts but what we do know is that instead of turning away from God, Joseph leaned in. He leaned into God, and his faith. He took Mary as his wife and cared for her until the baby was born. In fact, as far as we know, he was the only one with Mary the night that Jesus was born. How frightening this must have been for a young man who had not even had relations with his wife to attend the birth of this Holy child. Joseph leaned in.

And then, after the baby is born, Joseph is once again led by his dreams. This time being told to move his wife and young child out of the country to

save the baby from Herod's evil plan. At this point did Joseph think that he wanted nothing more to do with God, that enough was enough. Not only was he asked to raise a child that wasn't his own, but he was forced to move across the country not once, but twice to keep the child safe. Joseph could have turned away and said enough is enough, but instead, he leaned in. In to God, in to his faith, in to his belief that God was with him through everything that he was being asked to do.

And this is the message for us when our grief journey has led us to a place where we want to turn our backs on God. When everything in your body tells us to turn away, it's time to lean in and lean ON God.

We will be asked to go through hard times. Life will not always be the way we want it to be. We will lose jobs, be hurt by friends, suffer the pain of death and we won't want to live in this new reality. But, like Joseph, we are not in it alone. Lean in.

God is with us; all we have to do is lean in. Leaning in to God is not always easy. But remember the words that God said to Jeremiah, "I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."

God doesn't want you to hurt, lean in. When everything in you wants to blame God for your pain and suffering, don't turn away, lean in. For God's plans are filled with hope and light and the promise of the peace that surpasses all understanding.

After Mike's death I didn't lean in. I resigned from the St. David's Vestry. I quit teaching Sunday School and for months I wouldn't go to church. I didn't want to hear that Mike's death was part of God's plan or that Mike was in a better place. It wasn't until a friend pointed out that my boy's suffering was not part of God's plan. She reminded me that God's plans don't harm us, instead God, our Father, brings us hope and a brighter future.

It was like a light had been turned on. I started to lean in. Slowly the darkness lifted from my heart. I began to see that Mike was still with my boys in every memory we shared. I opened my heart to the word of the Lord and was able to hear messages like we find in tonight's reading from Isaiah - messages of hope - that the light will shine, and our Savior will be born. That with his birth comes the promise of a new life filled with peace and joy. Messages of hope that the light will shine again.

Tonight is the longest night. Tomorrow we will have just a little more daylight than we did today. It's a great day to start leaning in. God is there and in less than a week we will celebrate Jesus' birth.

*For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders,
and he is named
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
Great will be his authority,*

and there shall be endless peace

This peace is a promise to you that light is coming to take away the darkness if you let God in on your journey. A baby is coming. Lean in.