



Broad Street Presbyterian Church

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“Putting Aside Alleluia”

Matthew 17:1-9

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“B.J. Miller was a sophomore [in college] when, one Monday night in November of 1990, he and two friends went out for drinks and, at around 4 a.m., found themselves ambling toward a convenience store for sandwiches. They decided to climb a commuter train parked at the adjacent rail station, for fun. Miller scaled it first. When he got to the top, electrical current arced out of a piece of equipment into the watch on his wrist. Eleven thousand volts shot through his left arm and down his legs. When his friends reached him on the roof of the train, smoke was rising from his feet.”¹

Miller’s story was told in *The New York Times Magazine* last month. I am borrowing heavily from that article.

Miller remembers none of the accident. His memories kick in several days later when he woke up in the burn unit of the local hospital. Doctors took off each leg just below the knee, one at a time. Then they turned to his left arm. For weeks, he was close to death. But he survived.

Early on in the recovery process, this triple amputee struggled to find a positive way to look at his situation. When he found it, he committed to faking that perspective, hoping that his genuine self might eventually catch up. This is what he came up with. Miller tried not to believe that his life was extra difficult, only uniquely difficult, as all lives are. He resolved to think of his suffering as simply “a variation on a theme we all deal with — to be human is really hard.”²

He’s right about that. To be human is really hard. Whether we are a toddler learning to walk, a teenager trying to figure out where we fit in, a young adult searching for meaningful work, a middle-aged person recalibrating our expectations, or a senior dealing with physical and mental decline, to be human is really hard.

It seems that we are all missing something. It’s obvious what Miller is missing. Anyone can look at him and know what he is lacking — both legs and one arm. For the rest of us it’s less obvious.

Who or what are you missing? Maybe you are missing the one you love because they have died or no longer love you back or maybe years of loneliness have taken their toll on you.

Who or what are you missing? Some of us miss knees that don’t ache, backs that don’t seize up, memories that don’t fail us.

To be human is really hard.

But there’s hard and then there’s hard. Living without three limbs — that’s really hard. But that’s not how B.J. Miller sees it.

¹ https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/03/magazine/one-mans-quest-to-change-the-way-we-die.html?_r=0

² IBID.

According to *The New York Times* article, his life never felt easy, even as an able-bodied suburban boy with two adoring parents. But he never felt entitled to any discontent. He saw unhappiness as an intrusion into the carefree existence he was supposed to be living. And most people do that, he realized. We treat suffering as a disruption to existence, instead of an inevitable part of it. Miller wondered what would happen if he could integrate suffering into his version of normalcy.³

So, he worked hard to see himself as merely sitting somewhere on a continuum between the man on his deathbed and the woman who misplaced her car keys, to let his accident heighten his connectedness to others, instead of isolating him. He made the remarkable choice to learn what he could from his suffering and the suffering of others.⁴

What if we do the same? What happens if we treat suffering as an inevitable part of life rather than a disruption to be overcome? What if we accept that life can be hard and integrate that knowledge into our understanding of what a whole, healthy, faithful life looks like?

That's what the church does every Lent. For forty days we agree to put aside easy answers, push away shortcuts to joy and happiness and instead do our best to be honest about the ways in which life is hard.

That's why we bury the alleluia. Here at Broad Street we don't bury the alleluia. We hide it. We hide this banner. Actually the children of the church hide it. We've been doing this for a few years. Every year I try to make the children tell me where it is. They haven't cracked yet. They are good at keeping the secret.

This burying or hiding the Alleluia is an old, old tradition, more common in Lutheran churches. For congregations that embrace this practice, we do not say or sing "Alleluia" during the season of Lent. We fast from using that word, creating a sense of anticipation so that our "Alleluias" may be sweeter and stronger when we say them again on Easter morning.

Put another way, Lent is an exercise in treating suffering as an inevitable part of life rather than a disruption to be overcome. Don't mishear me. I am not suggesting that we seek out suffering. To be honest, I don't think that's in our playbook. Midwestern Protestants don't seek out suffering. We don't even talk about it. We are much better at pretending that things are fine. We are much better at pushing down negative emotions such as anger and fear and sadness — burying those emotions so that they can emerge later in passive-aggressive and inappropriate ways. (At least that's the way we do things in my family!)

I remember a conversation I had with a 65-year-old parishioner a few years back. "How are things going?" I asked. "Fine. Things are fine," he answered. I knew from his daughter that things were not fine. He had been asked to leave the company that he had served faithfully for over forty years, his wife had recently been diagnosed with Alzheimer's, and he himself was facing major surgery. I gently pushed back on the "Everything is fine." By the end of the conversation he was willing to admit that he was facing a few challenges but it was nothing he couldn't handle.

It does not come naturally to us to admit that we aren't fine, that we don't have everything under control, that sometimes life is just hard. Which is too bad, because in my experience, when we push away the reality of suffering, we push away a part of ourselves.

³ IBID.

⁴ IBID

I think of B.J. Miller who insists that our suffering is not an impediment to wholeness but simply a part of who we are. He dares us to look at him missing three limbs as he says, “This is what wholeness looks like. This is what completeness looks like.” He cannot forget all that he has lost. He chooses to integrate that loss into his story. His missing parts and pieces shape his work in the world and lead him into community and connection.

That’s some of the wisdom he gained from eleven thousand volts of electricity.

A few thousand years earlier, another man was shot through with power and light. This morning’s reading tells the story of transfiguration. It’s a strange tale that takes place on a mountaintop. God’s light transforms Jesus. And then it’s over. The story doesn’t tell us how the whole thing feels for Jesus — it doesn’t tell us how this experience changes him. What we do know is that, after it is over, he comes down from the mountain and starts walking towards Jerusalem, towards arrest, suffering, and death on a cross. After transfiguration, Jesus fully embraces suffering as a part of life and invites us to do the same.

As for B.J. Miller, he went on to become a doctor, specializing in palliative care. He became the executive director of the Zen Hospice Project, a nonprofit that trains volunteers for a public hospital as well as for its own residential operation. Zen Hospice is part of a growing nationwide effort to reclaim the end of life as a human experience instead of primarily a medical one.⁵

At the Zen Hospice, the most crucial piece of the operation is its staff of volunteers. The nursing staff handles the medical duties, leaving the volunteers free to be with residents, offering their full attention. The volunteers are ordinary people: retired executives, social workers, bakers, underemployed millennials and empty-nesters. Among the volunteers, there’s an emphasis on accepting suffering, on not getting tripped up by one’s own discomfort around it. Miller explains, “You train people not to run away from hard things, not to run away from the suffering of others.”⁶

Hmm. Sounds like our work during Lent: to train ourselves not to run away from hard things, to embrace our own suffering and the suffering of others and acknowledge the pain of the world. That is why we put away the alleluia.

There is one exception to the practice of not saying Alleluia during Lent. That is during a funeral service, when we say it no matter what season it is. Because our story does not end with Jesus hanging on the cross. It continues to the empty tomb, to God’s victory over the power of death. Every Good Friday always leads to Easter morning. We say Alleluia to remind ourselves of that hope, that promise. In the weeks to come, even when we don’t say the word, we can hold on to the assurance that God always, always triumphs over death.

For today, may we say and sing that joyful word with confidence.

Alleluia!

Amen.

⁵ IBID.

⁶ IBID.