Reece Frith 30 – 7 – 23

“Near”

Joshua 1:1- 5:

> **“**After the death of Moses the servant of the Lord, the Lord said to Joshua son of Nun, Moses’ aide: “Moses my servant is dead. Now then, you and all these people, get ready to cross the Jordan River into the land I am about to give to them—to the Israelites. **3** I will give you every place where you set your foot, as I promised Moses. **4** Your territory will extend from the desert to Lebanon, and from the great river, the Euphrates—all the Hittite country—to the Mediterranean Sea in the west. **5** No one will be able to stand against you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you.”

Psalm 119:151:

> “Yet you are near, Lord,
> and all your commands are true.”

Matt 28:19 – 20

> “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, **20** and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

John 14:16 – 17:

> “And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever— the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you.”

Acts 17:7:

> “God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us.”

Right back near the start of the year I talked about faith.
We looked at 1st Peter where it says that faith, our faith, is more precious than gold.
So I talked about how faith – our trust in God, our allegiance to Him – is exceedingly valuable in God's eyes.
That God cherishes that we trust Him because he is trustworthy.
I also said that that faith, this most precious possession – our faith in God – will always be put to the test.
And as I said at the time, the sad thing is, not everyone passes the test.

So I told the story of Bart Campolo.

> The abbreviated version is that Bart started over here – Bible studies and youth groups, and church every Sunday and youth camps (all good stuff by the way) and inner city urban mission and a much sought after speaker.
> He was all in!
> Then stuff just keep happening to him and people around him.
> He saw people that he was trying to help experience terrible, terrible things.
> The floods kept coming.
> And the house called 'faith' starting creaking and shaking.
> The final straw was a serious cycling accident.
> While recovering he said to himself, "When this body dies, I think that will be the end of Bart Campolo. I don't think I will be going anywhere. I don't believe in eternal life in that way anymore."
> So he started here – a believer of sorts – but ended up over here, self-defined atheist.
> When the floods of life came he went to pieces in terms of his faith.

Jesus did say that there are life events that come on like a torrential flood.
Tragedy, suffering, terminal illnesses, accidents, relational breakdowns – these types of things – occur to both followers of Jesus and to those who don't.

This tells us something about the nature of life itself, whether we follow Jesus or not.
We all inhabit the same life space.
We all live in the same world.

And Jesus when he lived here among us he played by same rules.

He experienced rejection, aloneness, betrayal, exhaustion, abandonment, grief (his cousin was executed by the state) and died a cruel death on a Roman cross.
The floods will come… but faith doesn't have to go to pieces.

Let me tell you story of Jerry and Linda.

Jerry and Linda married and discovered early on that they couldn't have children. However by the grace of God after 11 years they managed to have children which they home-schooled.

And one particular time the kids were studying and learning about the Native American Indian culture. So Jerry and Lynda came up with a wonderful plan to visit an American reservation in Idaho in the States to meet and talk with some American Indian people face to face.

So the whole family – the mum, the dad, the four children, and the grandmother – all piled into their minivan one Friday afternoon and headed off . They got and they that had dinner with the tribal leaders, and they watched the tribal dances and talked to the tribal elders who lamented the impact alcohol was having on their own people.
So it was this wonderful learning, cross-cultural experience.
Then it became evident that it was 8:15 and the kids were ready to go.
So they piled back into the mini-van, made sure everyone was buckled in, and headed for home.

About ten minutes into the trip home, the dad Jerry noticed an oncoming car on a lonely stretch of highway traveling at a dangerously high speed. So Jerry slowed down his car, but the other car did not. And this other car jumped its lane and smashed head-on into the minivan doing over 135 kilometres per hour.
It was mayhem and madness. It was a wreck.

And when Jerry finally came to and looked around at the carnage and the wreckage and said it was chaos.
He wasn't seriously injured – he was bruised and dazed and he soon saw that his mother Grace was dying…
His wife Linda was catastrophically injured and he knew instinctively that she wouldn't survive and his youngest 4 year old daughter Diana Jane was dead.
Three generations lost in an instant.

> The road was so isolated that Jerry's family spent more than an hour there before help arrived.
>
> "I remember the feeling of panic that struck my soul as I watched Lynda, my mother and Diana Jane all die before my eyes. I remember the pandemonium that followed - people gawking, lights flashing from emergency vehicles, a helicopter whirring overhead, cars lining up, medical experts doing what they could to help."
>
> And I remember the realization sweeping over me that I would soon plunge into a darkness from which I might never again emerge as a sane, normal, believing man."
>
> He said it was like a torrent of pain.
> It was like each loss was an amputation.
> This was a Christian family.
>
> For a long while afterward Jerry felt like a caged animal filled with anger and rage but he came through that.

Here's the thing: unlike Bart Campolo, Jerry's faith didn't go to pieces even when he had every reason to.

Jerry is still following Jesus today.

"So makes the difference?"

Tell the person next to you.

As an aside for us, in many ways as Christians in the West, we have not been adequately prepared for suffering.
I think Covid exposed this.
We have much to learn from our brothers and sisters in the developing world.

Jerry as I said, is still a Christian today, through all his hurt and suffering.
He wrote a book about it offering insight into what he went through.
Actually two books.

The first insight is this: when tragedy occurs, there's something that happens to us.

There is also what happens *in* us.
Stuff happens to us and there is stuff that happens in us.
True???

Certain negative emotions can well up within us – understandably – like anger or bitterness or despair – and these can so overwhelm us that it's changes the outlook of our lives and we live with a damaged soul.
And then what happens there are times when that is the lens through which we see the world.
The saying "Hurt people, hurt people" rings true.

> There was this young 18 year old woman and she was just about to get married.
> Then three days before her glorious, much anticipated wedding day her sister ran off with her fiancée…
> What would you do with that?
> She experienced it as if her feet were stapled to the ground with absolute pain and hurt and betrayal and embarrassment and humiliation.
> Then over the next 50 years the sister who ran off with the fiancée kept trying to reconcile.
> She kept coming back but every time the wronged sister rebuffed her and refused to extend forgiveness.
> Instead she exhibited bitterness and initially it was a *choice*.
> But gradually she solidified in her bitterness and in the end she could not choose otherwise and *her bitterness became her nature*.

It's understandable to feel anger, bitterness and despair after catastrophic loss.

But in doing so we give some kind of tragedy more power than it deserves and becomes the defining moment instead our response being the defining moment.

Then soon it's affecting other relationships, it affecting life habits that we form, and decades later, twenty or thirty years later that divorce or that loss or whatever dominates our lives.
To become permanently trapped in these emotions becomes like a second death, "the death of the spirit."
The first kind of death happens to us; the second kind of death happens in us.

So for Jerry, he didn't want to become that type of person.
In his Christian conviction from what he read in Scripture he could see that.
But that wasn't at the core.

It relates to the passages we heard earlier:

> "…I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you."
> "I am not far from anyone…"
> "I am with you always, to the very end of the age…"
> "I am with you and in you…"

And one more, Psalm 46:1:

> "God is our refuge and our strength. An ever-present help in times of trouble."

The best Jerry could do through all those weeks and months and years was to keep talking to Jesus.

So sometimes in heart break and absolute despair – he would bring that to Jesus.
Sometimes in bitter anger and rage – he would bring *that* to Jesus.
Sometimes when there was no words and just wept… he would bring that too to Jesus.
What Jerry discovered in the pain and loss (by the way he said he would have his family back in an instant) was a richness and comfort from Jesus like nothing he'd ever known before.

Paul says, "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles…"

You see in Scripture we discover a God who with us in the thick and thin.
God is near.
He is close.

And although that is the case there are all sorts of temptations we face in those times.

There is a temptation that when the floods come, to go quiet with God.
To close down.
To shut off.

And that may be for a myriad of reasons.
For some it's that this feeling God can't handle what we're feeling.
The emotions are too much for God.

It could be that we don't want to revisit that time or those times that caused so much pain and distress.

It may be that we failed, we wronged others, and it means having to back down and admit it, and you know that and God knows that.

So it could be this morning that maybe some of us have areas of our lives we've never talked about with Jesus.

It could be for you that that area is in danger of solidifying… but it doesn't have to.

He is near.

We keep the conversation going and what we discover is this: in Jesus there is comfort.
In him the is peace. In him is hope. There is understanding.
In him there is joy… even if we do not sense it at first.

So to close…
It's November… the end is nigh.
The end of the year is nigh and for some of us a lot has happened this year.
And for some us some of that has been really, really tough.

So may it be a reminder to us all that whatever we have been through, God is near… with all of who He is.

In the silence, I'm going to read again the passages we heard earlier:

> "…will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you."
> "I am a God who is nearby…"
> "I am not far from anyone…"
> "I am with you always, to the very end of the age"
> "I am with you and in you…"
> "I am ever-present help in times of trouble."