

Jenni West Funeral Sermon
December 10, 2019
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
The Rev. Ian Burch

Good morning and welcome to St. Mark's Episcopal Church. It is our honor to host you this morning as we share both our grief and our hope in the face of Jenni's death. Please let this space be for you a refuge and a place of welcome. The family has asked me to offer a special thanks to everyone who helped put together this beautiful service and the reception that follows. Thank you.

Do you remember sometime in the middle of October when, instead of gathering the last of the autumn's apples and raking leaves, we were shoveling snow and bracing for January-like temperatures? Most of us in Wisconsin are pretty well accustomed to swings in the weather, but November 2019 was a doozy. The leaves on the trees were gold and red and even purple in places, but instead of fading green grass, the lawns and walkways of our neighborhoods were covered in white. I'm not sure I've seen anything quite so arresting. On the lake across from my house, the water was frozen, and piles of leaves were being blown across the surface like confused ice skaters just after Halloween.

The unseasonable snowstorm struck me as a bit eerie, maybe even a little scary. There is something not quite right about seeing snow fall before the leaves have left the trees. The order of things was not obeyed, and it felt like time was, in the words of Hamlet, "out of joint."

I believe this is akin to the feeling that comes upon us when someone dies too young. We don't ever think that a parent will bury a child. This chaos in the order of things adds a layer to our grief.

You see, we are not just mourning Jenni today. We are also mourning the years we hoped she would have; the relationships we hoped she would experience; the accomplishments at work we hoped she would achieve. We mourn Jenni, yes, but we also mourn the possibilities of a wonderful young woman who we miss very much. We wanted more laughs, hugs, meals, and above all else, time with Jenni. The grief is real, and it is complicated because we expected this day to come many decades from now. First, the leaves fall, then the snow. Not the other way around.

This church is here to help hold your grief — even when it is big, and even when it is complicated. The stones of this building are old, and they are loyal. This is hallowed ground, not just for the joys and praises to God that we sing on Sundays, but also for the lamentations of a grieving people that we offer today. There is not a sadness, nor a fear, nor a rage that this parish, and indeed that the Body of Christ cannot bear.

And, in the midst of sharing burdens, it is my hope that the church might offer a small word of hope on such a difficult day. Christians claim a special vision; we claim that we can see a sliver

of the world that God intends even when we are firmly standing in the world as it is. We profess a gospel of light even when we feel heavy with a recent death. You see this special vision written with power and precision in the reading the family chose from the Book of Revelation. The author of that famous vision was a man named John, who was in exile from the Roman Empire. John sat on an island and had visions and dreams about the way God intends the world to be. John casts his vision before us, assuring us that alongside the difficulty and despair in the earthly city of Jerusalem, there is another city — a divine city where we will one day walk with the saints, the martyrs, the prophets, and even with God. John sees a sliver of what the reign of God will look like, and he offers us a small comfort in our distress.

John writes, “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.”

The Christian life is lived always at this margin between the real grief of the world and the hope of the holy city of God. It might make us seem a little foolish at times — especially on a day like today when the grief is so real, and we find ourselves with questions and sadness. I think that our spiritual ancestors — like John on his island sharing his dreams with us — are trying to teach us to live in this margin. I think they are trying to show us the way to be true to grief while also being true to hope. Or put another way, the deepest winter may come early and furiously, but the Spring will always follow.

John’s sliver of hope might not mean a lot to you today, or it might mean the whole world to you today. I can’t know that. But I do know that this sliver of hope is yours completely — a free gift from God and from the church. It is yours to take out and examine in the days and weeks to come. It is yours during sleepless nights, and it is yours when you are missing your friend, your coworker, your sister, your daughter. This hope is yours when Jenni feels close, and when she feels far away. It is yours today and always.

I am so sorry that Jenni has died, and I am doubly sorry that Jenni has died so young. If I who knew her just a little feel this sadness, then I can only imagine the depth of the sorrow in this room. This Christian hope that John gives us was not built for sunny days of ease. It was built as a balm for wintery days like today, and it is yours forever. God bless you all. Amen.