"Jars of Tears; Jars of Oil"
Psalm 56:8 (God collects our tears in jars.)

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Whenever people start to cry, I am ambivalent about reaching for a tissue for them to dry their tears. On the one hand, it seems the courteous thing to do, the gesture that is culturally accepted, and expected, showing recognition of their crying.

On the other hand, I feel that handing a tissue to a person who is crying gives a subtle message that they should not let their tears roll down their cheeks, or they should stop crying, or that I'm uncomfortable seeing their tears…

I don't know whether I'm alone with this particular worry. [Ask]

I have never tried handing someone a little jar, saying, "Here, put your tears in this jar." I'm rather sure they would think I was at least odd, if not crazy.

Yet, when I came across this one verse in the 56th Psalm, I was exceptionally moved by the imagery—God holds our tears in jars.

Perhaps this psalm was a song of thanksgiving. Those who pray the psalm *look back* at a former time, when they shed tears. *In the present*, they are grateful that they made it through those sad times, with God comforting them.

Or, perhaps this psalm was a song that an individual prayed when he or she was actually in the midst of turmoil. He or she was shedding tears *at the time* and giving thanks *in advance* for the comfort they trusted God *would* give them.

Whichever the timing, this psalm beautifully portrays trust in God who provides comfort.

One of the young boys in our Sunday School, after seeing his mom cry, asked her when the quilt would arrive. The mom was perplexed, "What quilt are you talking about?" The boy said he had learned in Sunday School that when we cry, the Comforter would come. It's a good lesson: *When we cry, God will comfort*.

Today, when we heard Psalm 56, verse 8, from a variety of biblical translations, I'm sure you noticed that the translators named different *containers*. I love that! It's so contextual— a variety of thoughts about containers in which God keeps things! I'll refresh our memories. We heard God named as: storing every tear in a *flask,* keeping a *record*, entering laments into a *book*, listing our tears on a *scroll*, writing about our suffering in a *book*, collecting tears in a *bottle*, or a *waterflask*. . . (When I read a draft of this sermon to my sister, on Saturday, she started talking about *beakers* of different shapes—you see she worked in the medical field. See what she was doing? This is the very same thing people did when they translated this passage. She contextualized it, naming containers with which she was very familiar.

If we were to translate the intended meaning today, we might say that God saves our tears on the *Divine Hard Drive*.

Whatever the imagery, the intent is the same. God somehow keeps our tears dear to God—forever.

When you think about it, this one little verse in the Bible is a powerful statement about eternal life…about immortality. God saves our tears, forever. Forever, forever.

Christians may say "God saves," in the sense that God helps us to be whole, redeemed. . .

Also, "God saves" in the sense that nothing is lost. Our sadness is not lost in God, or on God.

Think about the implications of this *saving action* on the part of the Divine:

1. It's okay to cry. In fact, God expects it.
2. We don't have to hang onto our tears, for God will keep them.
3. If God saves our tears, wouldn't God also our laughter, too, forever…

It's okay to cry. (I) There was a time, the year after our son died, before I had noticed this verse of the Bible, when I actually wondered what container my tears would fill. I really did. I sometimes said I cried "buckets," knowing that was not literally true. So, I calculated at the time that maybe all those tears would have filled a thimble—perhaps my own mother's special thimble.

I think we think about containers holding tears only when there is a lot of crying. The image of a container for tears would not occur to us if we just got sappy watching a couple movies. Elizabeth McCrary, who has archeological knowledge from a while ago, informed us at our Worship Committee meeting that archeologists have actually found "tear jars." They would give the grieving family peoples' tears. Can you imagine that? She sent me an email this morning, telling me now archeologists are not so sure about the details. However, she said that we can see what the current view is by checking www.tearcatcher.com!

The Jewish people who came up with the metaphor in this Psalm that God has tear jars were crying a lot. They were looking both backward and forward—hoping for times when they would not cry so much.

You all know that shedding tears is healthy. Tears are a *precious liquid*; they are nature's way of literally *expressing*….deep feelings, oftentimes sadness. However, we all have experienced times when we were so happy, or we were in the midst of such beauty, that tears came.

We can let go of our tears, (II) for God will keep them. It is said that we have to tell about our sad events a hundred times, before we can let loose of them. I remember in my personal grief going through a stage when I was afraid that if I stopped crying, I would somehow be betraying my love for our son. I would never have thought that about someone else. If one of you told me you were no longer shedding so many tears over whatever you cried about, I would not think you no longer cared about that concern. Simply, that you had come to a renewed level of dealing with life.

Considering that God will keep our tears helps us to cry, but it also helps us to stop crying when we've expressed enough tears. We can trust that the sadness, the sorrow, the suffering remains in some corner of the universe—tucked into God's infinite *storehouse, memory, or jars.*

(III) *If God saves our tears, certainly God would also save our laughter*! In what kind of container would you like to imagine God holding our laughter, forever? I think a butterfly net would be perfect for holding laughter…or cupped hands, so that the laughter is both held *and* falls through the spaces between our fingers. Or, maybe laughter could be held in a flowerpot…so that the laughter could take root and bloom.

This metaphor of tears being held in God's jars is a way of saying: God cares, forever; God remembers, forever. We can give emotions—sadness, joy, laughter, fear, love—any experience—over to God, forever.

Tears are a precious liquid; they are a part of nature's healing powers.

There is another precious liquid that is good for us nutritionally, tastes good, and has been used for centuries as a soothing balm, to anoint. Olive oil. The word "olive" appears in the Bible 57 times. The Garden of Gethsemane means "the garden with the olive press."

Obviously, our Bible was contextual. Middle Eastern weather and plants were the context for Jesus' ministry, so he anointed with olive oil. There are sacred, life-giving liquids on every continent—coconut oil is as sacred for Pacific Islanders as olive oil is for Mid Easterners. Since we are using olive oil for anointing today, I want to share a little more about olives, so that we can gain the full flavor of the symbolism.

Olive trees live a long time, even to 1000 years old, withstanding harsh winters and scorching summers. Through all sorts of experiences, olive trees grow and continue to produce fruit.[1] The very word, "Messiah," in Hebrew, means "the anointed one." And, "Christ," in Greek means "the anointed one." Therefore, as we are anointed, we are symbolically allowing the Anointed One to minister to us and to heal.

If anyone were to shed a tear while receiving communion and anointment today, I want you to know that we will offer no tissues. If you have tears, they will need to roll down your cheeks. Instead, we recognize an exchange—*oil for tears*. God will hold and keep the tears that we let go of. In exchange, we receive the healing touch of oil on our skin. But the oil will not just go skin-deep. Think of it this way: this olive oil is soul food.

During this healing ritual, you may focus upon healing within your physical body. However, your body may be rather good at the moment. It may be that you would like your emotions, mind, or soul to be touched, anointed. Or, you may want to focus the healing energy toward another person.

When we come forward to receive communion, may we receive the bread of life and drink deeply of the living cup.

May we also symbolically let any of our tears fall into the caring hands, or jars, or water flasks, of our Comforter God.

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[1] Remember that in the 23rd Psalm it is said that God, as the Shepherd, "anoints my head with oil." That reference is to the fact that Shepherds rubbed olive oil into the wool of the sheep, for comfort, as they were gathering into the sheepfold at night.