

Strangers in a strange land

By [Larry Patten](#)

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Near the end of serving my last church, I helped a family bury their 44-year old brother. But he was also son, husband, father, and grandfather. Let's call him Sam. One of eight children, Sam met and married his wife when they were teenagers. Soon, they gave birth to two daughters. And the daughters had children.

Many at the funeral were under 50, and quite a few were parents with kids. Throughout the service there were bursts of giggles and sudden loud cries. For the children, a sanctuary was unfamiliar, even unsettling. Like a classroom, but not; like a theater, but not. The adults around them and holding them kept oddly quiet. And maybe the children even noticed that some adults cried. Unlike the children, the adult tears were hidden by a well-placed hand, or accompanied by soft sobbing.

Yes, I'm sure for the children it was a strange experience.

And yet, I think it was more peculiar for the adults. Church, for them, was a foreign land, a country with a border they had likely only crossed at a friend's wedding, or a funeral like this, or forced Sunday school attendance during adolescence.

Why was I standing before them? I suppose an answer could be that it was a "Methodist thing." Sam's oldest brother was part of a United Methodist Church in the Bay Area. When Sam died in Fresno, and with the extended family having no connection with any local church, the brother called. My church was at the crossroads of a web search, a friend's recommendation, and an ad in the Yellow Pages.

Would you help us bury Sam?

We live in a time when the church's influence is waning. At the beginnings of my ministry—the 1970s—it was still typical for a United Methodist moving to a new town to automatically search out a nearby United Methodist Church. Likewise for Presbyterians and Lutherans and so forth.

Not any more. People church shop. When the kids are young, you attend the *Church of the Holy Enough* because the worship service time and the childcare situation is perfect for “now.” A few years later, the kids get involved at the *Cooler Than Your Old Church* with its exciting youth ministry and the parents don’t complain. Who cares what flavor the church is, as long as 1) the kids are happy; 2) worship fits your schedule; 3) the location is convenient; 4) the pastor is nice.

And, of course, the reality for many people is no church attendance. When I grew up in the 1950s and 60s, I bet only a couple of my buddies didn’t go to church. It’s the opposite now.

Which is fine.

I prefer church attendance as a choice and not a cultural obligation. And I am aware, as I study the scriptures, that Jesus spent much of his time outside the “walls” of the sanctuary.

Sam’s eldest brother chose traditional hymns that were part of their mother’s funeral service from the prior year. While those songs were understandable choices, no one knew them. Hymnals were open, but mouths remained closed. Indeed the music that mattered most was a recorded version of Led Zeppelin’s “Stairway to Heaven” used for the service’s closing.

Did reading Psalm 23 help? That was the singular scripture the family requested. I hope they found meaning in those ancient words. It was likely familiar, but was their recollection of Psalm 23 from a sanctuary during worship, or because they’d watched graveside scenes from scores of films and television shows? My money was on Hollywood.

What could I say to these strangers in a strange land, these children and grandchildren and friends? These ones who grieved?

One thing I said, and I repeated it several times in different ways as I led the service, affirmed my belief about the nature of God. With a roomful of family and friends facing the death of a forty-four-year old, I didn’t want them to think God “took” Sam. I didn’t want them to imagine God “needed” their brother and husband and father and grandfather more than they did.

If there is any statement essential for me to share at a funeral, it is: "God does not take us away." I cringe when someone declares, trying to comfort a person after an unexpected tragedy, that the death was part of God's plan.

Every word I spoke was foolish. Inadequate. Feeble. This was an alien land. But their tears were real. I hope they sensed I served and knew a Creator of generous love, a Holy One who also grieved with them. I hope a few understood this tragedy had nothing to do with a capricious deity taking our loved ones as part of a secret divine "plan."

At the graveside, I quoted the shortest verse in the Bible: John 11:35.

"Jesus wept."

Jesus wept over hearing of his friend Lazarus' death.

And weep we must. Old and young. Child and parent. The little we can sometimes explain during tragic times will always be inadequate. Most of the time all of us are strangers beholding a strange land, and any words that will help us heal will help us remember we do not grieve alone.

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