

The Sting of Death

February 12, 2017

II Samuel 1:17-27; II Corinthians 4:7-12

The First U.P. Church of Crafton Heights

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When we left off last week, Achish and his Philistine army were preparing to attack the Israelites and King Saul, while David and his men had been sent home to their place in Philistia, Ziklag. You might remember that David and his militia discover that the place had been ransacked and all of their relatives kidnapped, and David cried out for help from God. I Samuel ends with an account of David's pursuit of the Amalekite raiders and the story of how families were reunited and David's reputation was continuing to increase.



¹There is, however, a dramatic development recorded at both the end of I Samuel and the beginning of II Samuel: we learn the outcome of the battle between the Philistines and the Israelites. A young man shows up in Ziklag carrying the crown and the royal bracelet: proof that King Saul of Israel is dead. This messenger is eager to demonstrate his loyalty to David, and even goes so far as to say that when he first encountered Saul, the king had been gravely wounded, but was still alive; at the king's request, the young man ended Saul's life.

When he first hears the news, David is overcome with grief and emotion. He weeps and fasts, as do the other members in his community.

The next day, he calls the messenger and asks for the story to be repeated. After the young man runs through it, David has him executed.

¹ The Battle of Gilboa from *The Winchester Bible*, 12th c. illustrated manuscript in Winchester, England.

This is the same David who chose not to kill Saul when he had the chance, even though for years Saul had been trying to kill him... the same David who chose not to kill Nabal, even when Nabal had treated him with contempt. David has shown restraint... until someone dares to raise a hand to the Lord's anointed. Now he orders the execution of this man who celebrates the death of the one who God had called.



²And then, David sings. The song that he writes and performs is called “The Song of the Bow”, and it is a public statement of grief on the occasion of the deaths of Saul and his son, Jonathan. Not only does David compose and sing this tune, he also commands that the entire nation learn it. Listen to “The Song of the Bow”:

David took up this lament concerning Saul and his son Jonathan, and he ordered that the people of Judah be taught this lament of the bow (it is written in the Book of Jashar):

“A gazelle lies slain on your heights, Israel.

How the mighty have fallen!

“Tell it not in Gath,

proclaim it not in the streets of Ashkelon,
lest the daughters of the Philistines be glad,
lest the daughters of the uncircumcised rejoice.

“Mountains of Gilboa,

may you have neither dew nor rain,

² *The Song of the Bow*, Marc Chagall (1967)

may no showers fall on your terraced fields.
For there the shield of the mighty was despised,
the shield of Saul—no longer rubbed with oil.
“From the blood of the slain,
from the flesh of the mighty,
the bow of Jonathan did not turn back,
the sword of Saul did not return unsatisfied.
Saul and Jonathan—
in life they were loved and admired,
and in death they were not parted.
They were swifter than eagles,
they were stronger than lions.
“Daughters of Israel,
weep for Saul,
who clothed you in scarlet and finery,
who adorned your garments with ornaments of gold.
“How the mighty have fallen in battle!
Jonathan lies slain on your heights.
I grieve for you, Jonathan my brother;
you were very dear to me.
Your love for me was wonderful,
more wonderful than that of women.
“How the mighty have fallen!
The weapons of war have perished!”

This is a remarkable example of a public lamentation over the intrusiveness of death in our lives. This morning, I'd like us to take a long look at what David is doing in composing and teaching this song to the people of God.

He names what has been lost. Four times in those eleven verses he mentions Saul by name; three times he mentions Jonathan. David, whose very name means "beloved of God", cries out at the loss of the one he names "beloved". He laments not just the death of his friend and his surrogate father, but the loss of any number of possible futures. This is a tremendous outpouring of grief not just from an individual, but from and on behalf of a nation.

Have you ever known this kind of grief? I, who probably spend more time with dead and dying people than most of you, have been surprised by it several times. Most dramatically, I remember a trip I was pleased to take through the nation of Egypt. We saw a lot of old things – and, by implication, a lot of death. Tombs and pyramids and catacombs...all kinds of death.



But one day we visited the military museum and cemetery at El Alamein. This battle was the culmination of a series of conflicts that were fought across Northern Africa for the second half of 1942. It was a decisive event for the Allies as it denied Hitler and Mussolini access to the Suez Canal. The thing that took my breath away was row upon row of headstones – each with a name and an age. Boys who came from Auckland, New Zealand, or Pretoria, South Africa, or Cardiff in Wales or Calcutta, India, or Ontario, Canada...and died at 21 or 23 or 32 in the deserts of North Africa. There were so many graves... J. V. Griffiths, J. W. McNeely, A. F. Martin, J. Alastair Seabrook, and too many "soldiers known but to God."

I wept on that day. I wept for these young men, and their families, and the sweethearts or children they may have left... and I wept because we are still building war cemeteries. And here is the truth: I was embarrassed by my tears. In fact, I made the rest of my group wait out in the parking lot because I didn't want to get in the vehicle while I was crying.

That's what we do, we Americans. Especially we male Americans. We deny the reality of death. We hold it in. We hide it from ourselves and each other. We refuse to make our grief public, and we don't know how to enter into someone else's sadness. Even those of us who claim faith, who talk of eternity and the promise we've been given... we don't know what to say and so we flee death.

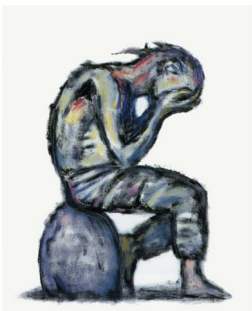


There's an ancient fable from Iraq that teaches us about the inevitability of death and our fear of it. It seems as though a certain man asked his most trusted servant to go to the market in Bagdad and buy only the finest of food and wine to share with his friends. The servant set out for this task, but returned home in a matter of moments, looking very alarmed and frightened.

"Master, just now in the market I was jostled by a woman in the crowd and when I turned I saw it was Death. She looked at me and made a threatening gesture. Please - let me take your horse so I can get away from here. I'll go to hide at my cousin's home in Samarra and Death won't find me there."

The master thought that was a fine plan, and so sent the servant off on his horse. Later, he went into Bagdad himself, and saw Death at the market. Angrily, he went over and said, "Why did you make such a threatening gesture to my servant?"

Death said, "I didn't threaten him at all - I was merely surprised to see him here in Bagdad. After all,



I have an appointment to meet him in Samarra tonight.”

³Don't we know how that servant felt? Aren't so many of us unwilling to consider any kind of death, whether it's our own or someone else's or some other form of loss or decay?

We avoid pain at all costs, don't we? There's an ache, a strain, a sadness, a sting... and we want to take a pill, have a drink, get a shot – anything in order to numb ourselves and avoid the suffering of the moment.

So much of the time, we can't even acknowledge the impact of the loss, the horror, or the grief that shows up in our lives. Think of all the times we are tempted to gloss over or make light of significant pain and real loss, simply because we don't know what to say or how to acknowledge the intrusiveness of death or suffering.

A friend's divorce is finalized... and we say, “OK, wow! Glad that's over... now, tiger, it's time to get back out there and make yourself happy!”

That young woman down the street suffers through the death of her child through miscarriage or infant death... and we say, “Hey, that's too bad... but at least you're young, and you'll have another...I have two friends who've been given 'rainbow' babies...”

The soldier comes back from a deployment in Afghanistan, where he has seen and done the unspeakable (often in our name)... and we pat him on the back, give him a free meal at Applebee's on Veteran's Day, and fly really big flags at the Super Bowl...

Your mother, sister, husband, or son dies, and four days after the funeral, people look at you and say, “Hey, how's it going, huh? Things coming back to normal, I bet?”

³ *Grieving Man – Face in Hands*, Clive Barker (2000)

No. No, it's not normal. None of these things is normal, and none of them are easily dismissed. Please, for the love of God, don't pretend that this kind of loss or death is insignificant.

Here is the truth, beloved: our pretending that we're going to live forever and that death can't touch us and that there's no loss that is deeply interruptive... well, that kind of charade is simply killing us.



The United States of America is by many measures the most highly developed, materially-blessed, economically advanced places in the world. And yet every year, 3.5% of American adults are diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. 9% of Americans will suffer from that at some point in their lives.

In the rest of the world, those numbers are between .5% and 1%.⁴

How can this be? Why are we experiencing this kind of anxiety disorder at a rate that is seven to ten times higher than the rest of the world? Are we dying more? Do we face more trauma than do people in other countries?

That's hard to imagine. By and large, I would suggest that we do not suffer the ways that many in the rest of the world do. So what's happening?

Could it be that we are victims of our own propensity to deny the reality of pain and death? When grief finds its way into our lives, we shove it deep inside. We hide it. We make it our own – our private possession, deeply personal. We hang onto it, but we are unable to share it, and so it becomes in some ways like Gollum's ring – it twists and contorts us, and us

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Posttraumatic_stress_disorder

alone, driving us further from community, further from reality. The ultimate result is that 40 million Americans now meet the clinical criteria for addiction to alcohol, nicotine, or other drugs, and a staggering 80 million more are termed “risky substance abusers”.⁵ More than 30% of adults in the United States suffer from some form of depression – the second-highest rate in the world.⁶



⁷And in contrast to all of this come the words of II Samuel and II Corinthians. Each of our texts for today speak of the importance of naming the reality of the fragility of our lives, of claiming grief as a public reality, of identifying the intrusiveness of loss in our lives, and of trusting God to see us through even when our own vision is failing us.

I know that worshiping together and seeking to act in a way that emphasizes the community we share are not cures for depression or addiction or PTSD.

But I would suggest that learning how to lament – how to come together and name the grief that affects us all at one time or another – is *one way* of seeking to prevent those afflictions in our lives and communities. We speak to the frustrations and rejections and devastations that we have experienced, and *together* we neither gloss over the losses we’ve suffered nor allow them to become the things that define us. You are *not* “the kid whose father died” or “the lady that lost her son” or “the man whose wife left him,” but those things *did* happen and surely cost you something. They are *there*, but they are not *all* that is there. There is more to it than that.

We are, all of us, mortal. And we all, each of us, have an appointment with death (*mortis*).⁸ We dare not deny the power

⁵ <http://www.usnews.com/opinion/blogs/policy-dose/2015/06/01/america-is-neglecting-its-addiction-problem>

⁶ <http://www.healthline.com/health/depression/statistics-infographic>

⁷ David Mourns for Saul, Guyart des Moulins (1357)

⁸ Thanks to Eugene Peterson (*Leap Over A Wall*, HarperCollins 1997) for this bit of insight!

or sting of death – but God forbid that we insist that’s all there is. The gesture of lamentation in community – of sharing grief and loss - helps us to see the bigger picture that God is writing through history, and how our own stories are wrapped up in the bigger drama of God’s working in the world. Each of our losses and all of our pain is in many ways ours alone, but it is ours to share in the presence and gift of community – a community that reminds us of hope and life and healing. Thanks be to God for that. Amen.