
Lament for a Son

2 Samuel 18:5-15, 19-33

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on August 12, 2012 by the Rev. Meghan Feldmeyer

A friend of mine serves a church similar to Duke Chapel in that ministers offer prayers for healing and anointing with oil during communion. He shared with me his recent experience of being one of the ministers of anointing on Easter Sunday. Easter is a day when the worship service is crafted to reveal extreme joy...brass instruments, choral descants, banners, and lilies all speaking to the abundance of God's love and the triumph of resurrection and victory over death. While my friend was sitting in the area where anointing is offered, he said to a new colleague, "you know, we don't tend to get a lot of people for anointing on Easter Sunday, mainly because it is just so hard to be sad on a day like today, when everyone is celebrating." No sooner had the words left his mouth when he saw a middle-aged couple slowly make their way to him. His heart fell, because he could tell...they wore the look of anguish. Utterly and profoundly grief stricken. It was evident in their walk...in their posture...in their faces. He gently leaned in and asked for their names, and what he could pray for. In a broken, soft voice, the husband was barely able to say, "Our son died on Thursday." My friend said that in an instant, all the bright, brassy, joyful music in the background felt suddenly jarring and discordant and even mocking. The day of celebrating the overwhelming love of God and the obliteration of death...it all felt so sharply painful in the face of this couple's immediate profound loss. The whole company of saints around them bubbled over in praise for the son that triumphs over the grave...and here they were, broken and brave, having just buried their son. My friend sat and prayed with the couple, and he wept, and they wept...wept in yearning and grief for their dead son on Easter morning.

I ache when I remember this story. I can't really imagine facing such a horrifying loss and still coming to an Easter morning celebration just a few days later...not when the contrast of resurrections and death is so cutting. Even when there is hope of resurrection, it is the loss in the *here* and *now* that is usually so brutally painful. It is the empty space at the dinner table...the phone that will no longer ring with the sound your loved one's voice...the habit of wondering what someone is up to, only to remember that person is no longer here.

Today's scripture lesson is about the death of another son, and a father's anguish and lament over his death, a grief that is also lived out while everyone else is celebrating a victory. The lesson from 2 Samuel describes a rebellious son named Absalom, and his father, who happens to be king. Absalom not only killed his half-brother in a quest for revenge, but he had long been trying to undermine the rule of his father, King David. By today's reading he is well on his way to achieving enough of a following to overthrow his father's reign. This is a father-son relationship of significant tension and strain. But King David's love knows no bounds...he gives specific instruction to his soldiers to "deal gently with Absalom" for his sake. It is a brutal war, compounded by weather and terrain (scripture says "the forest claimed more victims that day than the sword."), but Absalom survives. The story describes Absalom riding his mule after battle and becoming caught on a tree...the rabbinic tradition says that it was his long hair that caught in the branches...and he hangs from the tree poised between heaven and earth when some of David's men discover him. These men gave their loyalty to the king, and although King David instructed them to deal gently with his son, the men do not want to see David's reign overthrown and their own power compromised. So instead of dealing gently with Absalom, these men brutally murder him by piercing him with three spears as he hung. When the sentinels come to David to bring tidings of victory, all David cares about is the fate of his son...the victory is irrelevant. David is devastated at the news of Absalom's death. He went up to his chamber over the gate, and wept; crying out, "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would that I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!"

I find this to be one of the most heart-wrenchingly honest moments in all of scripture. It is the anguished grief of every parent's worst nightmare...and the deep yearning for your life to be traded for the one that was so full of promise. In this gut-level cry of torment, David isn't even questioning God or his faith...he only cries out for his dead son, who was once in the world, and now is gone. A gaping hole remains where once was life and

laughter and hope of the future. The breach between father and son can now never be mended. David's cry is one of honest lament for all that was lost, for all that can no longer be.

Have you ever lost something you can never regain? Have you ever seen something sacred slip from your life and have it be hopelessly and irretrievably lost? Have you ever lost someone you love?

Our culture isn't very good at knowing how to grieve. We don't have a particularly good sense of what it means to offer lament in the face of death and loss. The church has gone from a place where lament was part of a rich tradition that was embraced to a place where lament is almost disgraced. Tears are a sign of weakness; rational thought is valued. As one theologian questions, "Why celebrate stoic tearlessness? Why insist on never outwarding the inward, when that inward is bleeding?"¹ It used to be more common that people would wear black to signify they were in mourning. That doesn't happen as often any more, but any of you who have ever been stung by loss may recognize the gift of being able to signify outwardly what you are grieving inwardly. The ritual of wearing black was a way to say, "please be gentle with me, I'm broken, I'm fragile, my life has been turned upside down." There is mercy in a ritual like that which signals that your world has collapsed, even as the rest of the world marches on.

Two of my dearest friends from college lost their 4-month old son to Sudden Infant Death Syndrome about 5 years ago. In talking to my friend recently, she said that there were many days in the weeks and months that followed her son's death when she would literally fall apart...actually fall to the ground and lay there while she cried out in despair, sometimes to God, other times to nothing at all but a great sense of emptiness. Her breasts ached with the weight of milk, and her mind was haunted with vivid memories of that awful morning. On the weeks she managed to go to church, she would sit in worship and she'd weep openly throughout the hymns and praise songs, the prayers, and sermon...because she no longer knew if she believed anything she was singing, or praying, or hearing. Gratefully, she was in a church that didn't overlook or dismiss her pain. The faith that had hemmed her in her whole life was unraveling. Nothing was real anymore, other than the overwhelming agony of loss. She said it was also a season of brutal honesty with God...this God she wasn't even sure if she believed in any more. She poured out all her confusion, her anger, her perplexity, and grief...again and again she poured out her heart...and in the end she realized God could bear the depths of her reality. The horror of their tragedy was transformed and healed in part because she didn't try to protect herself or God from all the bitter emotions and lament that defined each day. She hid no part of herself from God...and though it sometimes felt like God was hidden from her, in the end she said discovered she was being held in God's embrace. It was a profoundly sad time of her life, but she found a gift in the honesty this experience forced her to have with God, and with herself. She did not shield herself from lament. She did not shield God from her lament.

Christians often have deep fear and guilt about lamenting before God. Doubt and anger and grief expressed to God are seen as a lack of trust in God's faithfulness. But what if the opposite is true? What if expressing doubt and anger and grief before God is fundamentally an act of trust? Because it is trusting God with every part of yourself...the whole of who you are...even if who you are is broken and angry and nearly ruined. Lament is not about getting answers, or explaining away suffering...it is fundamentally about laying your heart open before God when there are no answers or explanations to be had.

What does David's grief over Absalom teach us about lament and the nature of God? The question of why God allows suffering is one that has been asked throughout time. It is the question I ask when I think of the couple on Easter morning, or my friends who lost their baby. The Bible is full of stories of the faithful suffering...but it is also full of stories of God's presence. We have no reason to believe we won't suffer, but we have every reason to believe that God will be with us in our suffering.

Let's look at Absalom. His name in Hebrew means leader of peace. In naming him, his father must have certainly hoped his son would be such a leader. Instead his son grew up to be a rebel. Absalom spent years in anger and resentment plotting to overturn his Father's kingdom. And this leads to his death - a murder on a

¹ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son*, 26. I am indebted to this slim and poignant book, about the author's own loss of his son, for contributing to many of the reflections on grief as I prepared this sermon.

tree. Spear marks in his side. Hung between heaven and earth.

Christian faith speaks to another Father and Son, and the Holy Spirit that binds all together in the great mystery that is the Trinity. Let's look at Jesus. He is called the prince of peace. In naming him, his father must have certainly desired him to be such a leader. Jesus is the obedient son. He spends years in service and ministry, seeking to bring about his Father's kingdom. And this leads to his death - a murder on a tree. Spear mark in his side. Hung between heaven and earth.

And in this death, God the Father doesn't just weep for his son as David wept, "Oh my son, my son, my son," but God also becomes the one who literally shares in that death. David's words, "Would that I had died instead of you" are made manifest in the mystery of the Trinity. God's lament for humankind, for you and for me, is embodied and embraced in the suffering love of Jesus, who hung between heaven and earth...bridging the agony of earth with the glory of heaven. So although we are like Absalom...we are the rebellious children...the Father loves us so profoundly that he sends his innocent son, in fact he becomes the innocent one. We are not left hanging between heaven and earth, but we are instead gently lifted into the embrace of heaven. The words "Would that I had died instead of you" take on flesh in Christ. And yet God's heart still breaks on the cross. The refrain of God's lament washes over us, because he does not leave us to suffer on our own, but enters into our suffering. Joins us in death. God's promise was not that our suffering would be removed, or even explained. God's promise is that our suffering would be met with his presence.

God is not only with us when we grieve...God knows the suffering of death because God experienced it. And in Christ, God knows death first hand. At the death of your spouse, your mom, your young child, your dear friend...Christ dies with them. Even though they die...and they do die...they will live again, because Christ does not leave them in the grave - they will rise with him. There is no longer unending never-ness, hopelessness, and irretrievable loss. God retrieves the loss. God's heart breaks with us and for us, and he tenderly gathers us in our grief. We are held in the arms of God's suffering love.

I think back to the couple on Easter morning. I think of their courage to place themselves in the center of exuberant joy when their hearts were overcome with loss. I find myself wondering how they did it. But I wonder if it is only in the midst of terrifying loss that we can fully appreciate the promise and hope of resurrection. I wonder if they came because they needed to be reminded that their overwhelming loss would be met by God's overwhelming love. Their tears signified their honest lament before God. And God's tears mingled with theirs. But tears are not the end of the story. God is the end of the story. A chorus of angels is singing. The cymbals and trumpets are sounding. God is with them and holds them close to his heart. The time is coming when God will wipe every tear from your eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more. The time is coming when we who die will be held in the arms of a God who knows our suffering and our death, and whose love has overcome them both. Amen.