

June 27th, 2021

2 Samuel 1:1, 17-27 “Song of the Bow”

One of the things that Mary and I agreed on and that I teach in my clergy ethics and boundaries class is that clergy couples need to practice vocational boundaries with each other at home. In other words, I’m not Mary’s pastor and she’s not my chaplain and grief counselor. We have other people in our lives that serve that purpose, and that’s more than okay, that’s healthy boundaries. Now if she needs help with a sermon, I’m there to assist. If I’m in over my head with someone who is experiencing acute grief, she’s there to help me. We’ve also allowed each other the benefit of passing tidbits of wisdom on to the other person. She was a great help during this last year when my dad’s quality of life was diminishing, and the pandemic limited our contact with him. She had some great resources to help me out. So, for the most part, we stay in our corrals except when I run into a scripture like the one we have in front of us this morning. Not only is it outside my field of study, but it also hits just a little too close to home for me right now.

We’ve been studying the rise of Israel’s monarchy over the past month, which is something we’ve been doing more thoroughly in Bible study over the past year. It’s a big treat for pastors when we see scriptures from Bible study pop up in the lectionary, but it’s also fun to see what the lectionary considers as key texts for understand the narrative. I mean of course we’re going to read about the people demanding a king and getting a bozo like Saul. Of course we’re going to read about how God led them to King David who was a prime example of a leader whose credentials come from his inward character instead of his outward appearance. And you’ve *got* to have the story of David and Goliath just because it’s so awesome! But this week, the commission that puts the lectionary together gave us “The Song of the Bow.” This is the soon-to-be official King David’s lament over Saul and his son Jonathan. It was so important to David that he ordered the song to be “taught to the people of Judah.” So, what’s so important about this song? What does it say about David? What are we supposed to get out of it?

First of all, let's talk about how we often deal with grief. We either want to sweep it under rug and hide it, or we want to offer platitudes to "fix" the person who is grieving. We say things like, "Your loved one is in a better place now. There's no reason to feel sad." Christians are often guilty of using this line. I think it's because we want to focus on the glory and joy the deceased will experience beyond the grave. The platitude that makes me cringe is when someone whose child has died is told, "It's okay, God just needed another little angel in heaven." The message is, "It's not right to grieve and be sad because the person who has died has gone to a better place. They've gone to be with Jesus. Therefore, we should be happy and rejoice for them." That's so toxic.

Okay, so if we shouldn't grieve because we ought to be okay with a person going on to meet their heavenly reward, then David got it all wrong because this lament is an unrestrained outpouring of raw grief. It's a striking testament to the sense of desolation that grief often brings. The person I loved more than any other in the world is gone, and no comforting theory about how much better off they are is going to make any difference because I'm *not* better off. I'm alone. I've been torn from my loved one and I can't do a thing about it.

I love that the Bible honors grief by including this passage in sacred scripture. And those of you who are familiar with the Bible know that this isn't the only example of grief in scripture. There are dozens of them in the Psalms. There is a whole book in the Jeremiah tradition called Lamentations. And that's just for starters. In the Bible, you will never find any sustained argument that grief and desolation are inappropriate for believers. Some would argue that Job goes there, but it's only because the writer has to set the argument up so he can knock it down.

I'm convinced that the idea that we shouldn't grieve because someone has gone to a better life is just plain wrong. I think the idea arises from a fairly simple misunderstanding of what grief is expressing. The mistake

is to assume that grief is focussed on the experience of the person who is gone. But for the most part, it isn't. Grief is actually focussed on *our* experience as the ones left behind. Ok. If you want to say that your departed loved is in a better place, fine. This is especially true if the person suffered before they died. Fantastic. They're okay now. But *we're* not! We're grieving for *our* loss, not theirs.

If you don't believe me, go watch what happens on the day that a moving van pulls up in front of a person's house and that person's neighbors and loved ones come by to say one last goodbye. The person may be leaving for new adventures or a better life elsewhere, but the people who are left behind are experiencing the pain of separation in a different way than the person who is departing. This is similar to death because you might be far better off where you're going, but something special will be missing from your neighbor's life as long as you are apart.

Most folks have experienced the grief of a major loss in their lives. If not, your time will come. I know that my dad's death is the first time that I've experienced the loss of an immediate family member. Even before dad's death, though, I've heard Mary teach that grief tends to be fluid. It has ups and downs, starts and stops and everything in between. It never really goes completely away, it just eases a little and acquires new layers. Sometimes when someone we know dies, we find ourselves grieving, not only for them, but all over again for several *other* people we've lost at earlier times.

Grief isn't just a personal experience either. A community or nation can experience grief, and then we all share in it to some extent. We've certainly experienced this as a congregation. We as a nation have layers and layers of grief in our national psyche, and most of it is largely undealt with. We bear the grief of our indigenous people and of those who have suffered from the atrocity of slavery. We bear the grief of generations of farming families who have been defeated by drought or fire or flood. We bear the grief of thousands and thousands of families

who lost sons and daughters in wars, often other people's wars that we went to fight. We bear the grief of several waves of refugees who have sought refuge here when their homelands were destroyed by one atrocity or another. I could go on. Grief upon grief upon grief.

So where is God in all this? Well, let's take a look at someone who is well known among Christians as one who is close to God. Let's look at C.S. Lewis as an example. He wasn't a formally trained theologian, but he wrote a lot about God in books like *Mere Christianity*, and *The Problem of Pain*. He also wrote fictional works that reflected his beliefs like *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *The Screwtape Letters*. Here's what C.S. Lewis said in his personal journal when he lost his wife Joy to cancer. He wrote, "When your need is desperate, when all other help is vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence."

Even Jesus had that experience of God. In the midst of the agony and grief of his own death, Jesus cried out, "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?" while he was being crucified. Almost every one of you who has experienced deep grief will know something of that feeling. It's not often talked about because not only does our culture tend to repress grief, but we also subscribe to this toxic myth among many Christians that you are not allowed to express doubts about God or show any anger toward God. But I know I'm not the only one who finds Jesus' cry resonating with things deep inside of me.

But that cry of abandonment is not the end of the story. And it's not the whole of the story for us either. There is something quite extraordinary that takes place in that story of Jesus and in what continues to take place week after week at this table. Have you ever wondered why it is that the central symbol of our worship is the breaking of a loaf of bread? Not the baking of the bread or the healing of something broken, but the tearing apart of a loaf of bread. Right here at this table we are acknowledging and enacting the truth that at the very heart of the gospel we proclaim is

profound experience of brokenness, of tragic loss, and of grief. Deep, deep grief.

And this is not some trite little memorial of a death long, long ago. What is actually happening here at this table is that God is becoming one with us in our brokenness and then turning the whole experience around so that through brokenness we can become one with God. When Jesus was murdered on the cross, we saw God entering into the experience of the woundedness of creation. In his own body Christ suffered the agony and exile and betrayal and grief of a broken world and its bereaved people. Deep in the heart of God all that agony and anguish is there. And with every death and every extinction and every broken home and every betrayal, large or small, the heart of God is broken again and again. And we see that enacted before our eyes at this table.

But it's not *only* the Table of Grief is it? It is also the Table of *Thanksgiving*. Our word "eucharist" means to give thanks. So how can it be both a place of deep grief and of joyous thanksgiving? Because God's response to a broken and dysfunctional world is not to destroy it and start again, but to incorporate its woundedness into the very being of God so that now our experiences of brokenness and grief are actually taking us deep into the heart of God, into the experience of God's own being. Perhaps there was a time before the first loss and grief when we walked with God openly in the garden and met God face to face in our wholeness. But now our communion with God is different because *we* are different and *God* is different. The scars of grief have changed us forever, but God has taken them on and been changed forever by them too. And now even our sharing in the signs of brokenness become a way of entry into the deep mysteries of God, and a means of intimate communion with God. Here at this table, the broken Christ offers himself to us, embracing us wounds and all, and incorporates us into his wholeness, so that each and every one of us might know that we are loved and serve with him as priests forever in the communion of all creation.