

Series Title: “The Monarchy is a Mixed Bag”

28 June 2015: 5th Sunday after Pentecost

FUMC—Arlington, TX 76011

“The Song of the Bow”—Preaching Text: 2 Samuel 1:1, 17-27

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The deepest definition of youth is life as yet untouched by tragedy
(Alfred North Whitehead: 1861 - 1947).

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Many of us remember the 1999 massacre at Wedgwood Baptist Church in Fort Worth, Texas. That tragedy hit pretty close to home a decade and a half ago. We have also seen stories on the news of students killed at high schools like Columbine and in West Paducah, Ky. But colleges are not immune to this phenomenon either. We only think back to 2007 when a 23-year-old student killed 32 people in two locations near or on the campus of Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, Virginia. One of the worst shootings—in which a lone assassin, Adam Lanza, gunned down 27 persons occurred on December 14, 2012 at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut. There are enough natural disasters to keep our fears fully occupied—and what makes these human calamities so much worse is that they are acts perpetuated on innocent people by those bent on self-destruction.

Our lesson today from the Hebrew Bible reminds us that grief and mourning have been around for at least 3000 years—about our story’s age which comes to us from 2 Samuel 1:1, 17-

27. Please hear our day’s lesson:

1 After the death of Saul, when David had returned from defeating the Amalekites, David remained two days in Ziklag 17 David intoned this lamentation over Saul and his son Jonathan. 18 (He ordered that The Song of the Bow be taught to the people of Judah; it is written in the Book of Jashar). He said:

19 Your glory, O Israel, lies slain upon your high places! How the mighty have fallen!
20 Tell it not in Gath, proclaim it not in the streets of Ashkelon; or the daughters of the Philistines will rejoice, the daughters of the uncircumcised will exult.
21 You mountains of Gilboa, let there be no dew or rain upon you, nor bounteous fields! For there the shield of the mighty was defiled, the shield of Saul, anointed with oil no more.

22 From the blood of the slain, from the fat of the mighty, the bow of Jonathan did not turn back, nor the sword of Saul return empty.

23 Saul and Jonathan, beloved and lovely! In life and in death they were not divided; they were swifter than eagles, they were stronger than lions.

24 O daughters of Israel, weep over Saul, who clothed you with crimson, in luxury, who put ornaments of gold on your apparel.

25 How the mighty have fallen in the midst of the battle! Jonathan lies slain upon your high places.

26 I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan; greatly beloved were you to me; your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women.

27 How the mighty have fallen, and the weapons of war perished (2 Samuel 1:1, 17-27)!

This story is quick to point out that when Saul dies, David is far away. Does David want Saul dead? If so, who could blame him? Some cynical readers of this account ask the question: “Is David’s elegy of Saul deeply felt or simply good politics?” In these stories of transferal of sovereignty, however, the story depicts David as believing that it is not merely foolish but immoral to lift a hand against “the Lord’s anointed” (1:14). Perhaps some think Saul’s sovereign anointing by God has worn off; it is not for David or anyone else to achieve what God alone may do. Only God can revoke God’s anointing.

Whatever David’s private feelings might be when he hears of Saul’s death David expresses himself with nearly unequalled poetry. Candidly this funeral oration/speech or elegy is in like measures both personal and public. David’s oration begins by grieving the corporate nature of the loss of Saul and also, of course, Jonathan. It is not the king alone who is dead, not even the king together with the heir apparent, but the country itself whose glory is slain. The survivors grieve for those who have died but also for themselves, for in a profound sense that all are slain.

This text is known by the title “The Song of the Bow” (1:17-27) and is a mourning lament. The refrain we hear three times is “How the mighty have fallen!” David asserts that all Israel sings this song, including Judah’s southern tribes—David’s home. The south was not on the whole fond of Saul, and teaching this song to them was one more way of David attempting to

unify the north and unclaimed south into one Israeli power—something Saul had failed to do.

David's elegy lacks two subjects we might suppose after a catastrophic defeat such as this: revenge and hope. The Philistine army continues to advance. Should David not hide the slain leader's caskets and rattle the sword, demanding an increase in military spending? Should David not be guaranteeing the people that YHWH will somehow redress this loss and rout the enemy?

The answer to these questions is: Apparently not. For David, there is a time for all-out grief after overwhelming loss such as this. The Philistines may advance, but now is the time that the nation spends its time doing nothing but grieving the country's loss. Today, whether a national loss be an attack such as September 11 or a school shooting, a time of doing nothing but attending our fresh wounds is fitting.

We all know—all too well—that once again; a wretched and cowardly act of violence has invaded the sanctity of a house of worship. Six years ago, the victim was Dr. George Tiller, who someone shot as he was serving as an usher in a Lutheran Church in Wichita, Kansas. Ten days ago the victims included nine people—Pastor and State Senator Clementa C. Pinckney of Charleston, South Carolina; Sharonda Coleman-Singleton; Tywanza Sanders; Ethel Lance; Susie Jackson; Cynthia Hurd; Myra Thompson; Daniel Simmons Sr.; and DePayne Middleton Doctor. This tragedy took place at Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church. Once more, places of prayer that should be sanctuaries for the spirit have become houses for homicide.

Yet these were not merely isolated incidents. Many Americans recall that James Earl Ray shot Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. when he stood on a hotel balcony in Memphis. Fewer of us will remember that later someone gunned down King's own mother in Atlanta while she played the Ebenezer Baptist Church's organ.

In either the best of times, or under the worst conditions, we live today in a society or culture that has no time to grieve. We must get "on with our lives" because perhaps it numbs the pain. To pause, reflect, and give thanks for those who have passed on before us—just takes too

long. When the lady in Oklahoma said on You Tube a few years ago: “Ain’t nobody got time for that” she was speaking for most of us. When someone we love dies, our friends surround us with themselves and diverting activities so that we are distracted from our great loss.

Nations and countries can be this way too. Countries suffer great losses as surely as do individuals. We as a nation—and perhaps church’s need to model this belief—need to stop and take time to account for our loss and losses. Recent losses and other losses that we have perhaps neglected over time.

David’ elegy is a reminder to all of us that as grief devastated people 3000 years ago and more, that we today are no different as we tally our losses as well. Traumatic loss, either personal or communal, leaves permanent emotional and spiritual scars. After the tragic losses suffered in Charleston last week or even as long ago as the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on 11 September 2001, many individuals and congregations find healing through revisiting lament psalms and learning to compose their own laments.

Lamentations can be cathartic prayers, calls for help, songs of remembrance, grief, anger, and hope. David’s lament over Saul and Jonathan provides but one example. Providing listeners a model and permission to lament can become good news to those who have lived with loss without a way to grieve that loss. God offers us this path through our grief via spiritual prayers and biblical texts too.