THE POWER OF THE POEM: DISLODGING GRIEF

SERIES: ASCENDING THE THRONE

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2 Samuel 1:17-27
Second Message
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Grief Silenced In the Modern World

It was a day like any other, a beautiful fall day in November. I was twelve, a painfully shy introvert, entering my adolescent years and carefully trying to tiptoe my way unnoticed among my intimidating peers. We were assembled at a co-ed gym class in the school gym, learning to square dance. Our awkward attempts at dancing were interrupted by the principal, who announced over the loudspeaker: "The President has been shot." We stood numbed, frozen in silence. Then came a second announcement: "The President has been shot and killed."

How do adolescents cope with such news? The teachers consulted together as we looked on, dazed. They concluded it was best we continue dancing. Anyone who felt that to be inappropriate could sit out, they said. Stepping out from the crowd takes courage for an adolescent; so I continued to dance. A nation was weeping, and I was dancing. The scene was surreal, like a dance of corpses. My next class was English. I remember the teacher walking toward the classroom to let us in after lunch. He seemed a bit flustered, but he covered it over with his quick, deliberate stride. With military-like cadence he gathered us together and announced to the little band of troops, "When a soldier falls in battle, the troops must go on. We must go on!" I silently objected: This was no ordinary soldier. But we went on. English, as usual. Death was never mentioned.

After school, my friend's mother insisted we go shopping. Entering a quaint little men's store, I recall the radio breaking in on our transaction with the constant repetition of Hail Marys. It was my first exposure to the rosary. I could tell my friend's mother was growing upset at being subjected to these religious incantations. The owner of store seemed increasingly anxious that his shop was still open. Finally, he broke the tension. He walked over to the storefront window and turned the "Open" sign around to "Closed." I sensed disgust from my friend's mother. She voiced her disapproval all the way home: How could that man have the audacity to close his store when she wanted to buy a pair of pants for her son? That night, alone in my bed, the haunting tones of the rosary kept echoing in my ears. I felt unclean, as if I had violated some unknown, holy boundary. But lest those holy drones penetrate too deeply, they were quickly drowned out on Sunday, when all the National Football League games continued uninterrupted.

That was the day the President was shot, and I was never allowed to acknowledge grief. I was told to keep dancing, studying, shopping, and playing. That was the day I learned how to use silence to confront the dark demon of death: Just erect a wall of denial and the dreaded beast will retreat back into the abyss from whence it came. Or would it?

Grief Acknowledged By the Ancients

David was in Ziklag when he first received the news that King Saul was dead. His relentless oppressor was no more! At last, David could take his rightful place on the throne of Israel. This was the crown predicted by the prophet Samuel, freely given up by Jonathan, lauded by the women of Israel, confirmed by Abigail, and finally acknowledged by Saul. This was the crown that David consistently refused to seize by his own efforts or manipulate by his own strength. This crown was the pure gift of God. The moment of vindication had arrived. David could safely leave the desert caves, dry wadis and valleys of darkness and come out into the open. He could finally don his royal vestments in full view of all of Israel.

After such a long and arduous journey in the wilderness one might expect quick, decisive action by the newly vindicated ruler. But no. The action stops. We, too, are forced to stop with it and take a long pause for reflection. David weeps. David writes a poem. David sings a dirge. And David makes sure all the children in Judah are taught to weep as well and sing about the harsh realities of life.

> **Then David chanted with this lament over Saul and Jonathan his son, and he told them to teach the sons of Judah the song of the bow; behold, it is written in the book of Jashar** (or 'the upright'). (2 Sam 1:17-18, NASB)

The bow (Hebrew, *qeshet*) was Jonathan's weapon. The word is a homonym for a word which means severe, or harsh. The phrase could be translated, "teach your sons the harsh realities of life." Teach them to lament the pain. David did not deny, ignore or bury his grief. Unlike us, he faced it and embraced it. It was unthinkable for him to continue his journey to the throne until he had hewed out deep channels to act as conduits for his tears; thus the poem.

It seems that in Israel's tradition, the poem was the most natural and powerful vehicle for grief: a poem crafted by an individual, publicly presented in commu-

nity, and offered to God as an act of worship; a tool to integrate the individual with life's harsh realities, within a community, and ultimately, to God. The poem was used widely in public worship in Israel. One-third of the psalms were written as psalms of lament. Even many of the psalms of thanksgiving have discordant notes of lament. One entire book of Scripture, Lamentations, is a carefully constructed acrostic poem of lament. The book of Job has lengthy speeches of lament.

So the poem is an apt setting for the expression of grief. Paul Celan, a German-speaking eastern European Jew who overnight lost his parents to Nazi deportation and spent the rest of his life an exile on earth, found that the only language adequate to describe his pain is poetry. He explains, "It is when we are in our deepest grief that the soul cries out for language, not to be more precise, but to lead us to transcendence."[1] The poet creates his work by the selective use of concrete images that emerge out of the story, images that are designed to evoke deep emotions from sacred memory.

By the juxtaposition of opposing images, the Hebrew poets give voice to the tensions we sense in our souls but have never felt the freedom to express. By means of the poem grief is identified, recounted, named, and legitimized. This public identification gives legitimacy to our feelings. As the poem is offered in community as an act of public worship, something new is mysteriously born in us: God descends, not to obliterate the pain, but to be with us in the midst of it. "The Eternal is brought out of contradiction" (Martin Buber). The poem becomes a window through which we may look into heaven. I have experienced the power of the poem at work in my own life and in the lives of this congregation over the past seven years, following my visits to Romania, the land of poets. But it was this text that taught me how and why the poem is such an apt vehicle to transcend grief and bring God near.

David's carefully structured poem has a threefold repetition of a refrain and three stanzas. It opens with the poet's anguished cries of impotence as he contemplates the future:

I. Facing The Future: Anguished Cries of Impotence (1:19-21)

(a) Impotent To Prevent the Inevitable (1:19-20)

> **"Your beauty** (or gazelle) **O Israel, is slain on your high places!**
> **How the mighty have fallen!**
> **Tell it not in Gath,**
> **Proclaim it not in the streets of Ashkelon;**
> **Lest the daughters of the Philistines rejoice,**
> **Lest the daughters of the uncircumcised exult.**

David's anguished cry describes the painful image of the royal crown slain on Gilboa. Death has set in emotion his worst fears and he feels impotent to do anything about it. "Tell it not in Gath!" he cries. Israel's worst fears have been realized. Her king is dead. Saul was left unprotected, abandoned by God, to be slaughtered, defiled, dismembered, and displayed by his enemies. Israel's king has suffered the same fate as Goliath, and now the news is going to spread, of all places, to Gath, Goliath's home town. How painfully ironic! We can imagine the jeering and gloating of the victorious army on their homeward march. Upon arrival, they are greeted with the cheers and songs of the Philistine women whose "gospel"[2] (good news) is Israel's defeat. Once the Israelites were the victors, and their women sang; now the Philistines are the victors, and their women are singing while the women of Israel are weeping (v 24). The unthinkable has happened! The uncircumcised exult, and Israel's God is implicated. Shame slaps them in the face, and David cannot do anything about it.

In the second stanza, David makes an anguished cry to creation to cooperate with him in his grief.

(b) Impotent To Create What You Long For (1:21)

> **"O mountains of Gilboa,**
> **Let not dew or rain be on you, nor fields of offerings;**
> **For there the shield of the mighty was defiled,**
> **The shield of Saul, not anointed with oil.**

If the height of Gilboa was the place where God turned his back on his anointed[3] and where the shield of the mighty was defiled,[4] then may that be the place where all of creation laments forever, is David's cry. May the heavens hold back their blessings of rain so that on Gilboa no worship will be offered. When we are overcome with grief we long for all of creation to groan with us. It is abhorrent to the human psyche that business continue as usual. There is discord in the soul if the Creator does not act in accordance with the events of history.

Elie Wiesel, who survived four Nazi concentration camps, felt this powerful dissonance when he returned to Birkenau after thirty-five years. He writes:

> The beginning, the end: all the world's roads, all the outcries of mankind, lead to this accursed place. Here is the kingdom of night, where God's face is hidden and a flaming sky becomes a graveyard for a vanished people. The beauty of the landscape around Birkenau is like a slap in the face: the low clouds, the dense forest, the calm solemnity of the scenery. The silence is peaceful, soothing. Dante understood nothing. Hell is a setting whose serene splendor takes the breath away. A fluke of nature, or was it planned by the torturers? This contrast between God's creation and human cruelty is to be found wherever the Nazis implemented their Final Solution: Here, as at Treblinka, Maidanek, and Buchenwald, the theoreticians and technicians of collective horror carried out their work surrounded by beauty, not ugliness. Only now do I discover the harmony and beauty of Birkenau. Surely, I was not aware of it thirty-five years ago. Then I saw only barbed wire; it bounded the universe. Sky? Birkenau had no sky. Only today do I perceive its

blinding and searing light; it consumes memory.[5]

Death shapes David's future, and he gives voice to his pain: "That which I dread, I cannot prevent; and that for which I long for I cannot create." He is helpless to prevent the inevitable, and powerless to accomplish the impossible.

Foreseeing no solace for his soul in the future, David turns to the past. Painfully, he discovers that it too has been clouded by death-dark hues.

II. Facing the Past: A Tragic Sense of Loss (1:22-23)

"From the blood of the slain, from the fat of the mighty,
The bow of Jonathan did not turn back,
And the sword of Saul did not return empty.
Saul and Jonathan, beloved and pleasant in their life,
And in their death they were not parted;
They were swifter than eagles,
They were stronger than lions.

(a) Painful Memories: Glory Trampled By Death

Here, at the center of the poem, is the eulogy, the verses where the dead are remembered at the height of their powers. David paints Saul and Jonathan in all their splendor: two invincible warriors, unconquerable in war. They never went out to battle in vain; their weapons always accomplished their purpose. Overpowering all opponents, father and son ruled supreme. They were swifter than eagles (which rule the skies), and stronger than lions (which rule the land). But these once glorious images are now tainted by thoughts which the poet has left unstated, yet are strongly alluded to. For these glorious images which once evoked praise and awe—the archer's accurate bow, the penetrating sword of the king, the spilled blood of the slain, the eagle's speed, the lion's strength—now become painful reminders to David of Saul and Jonathan lying dead on Mt. Gilboa, and the savage power of death.

These images are like two-edged swords which lacerate the soul. Twenty years ago this very week, I enjoyed one of the happiest moments of my life when my wife Emily gave birth to our son, David Jonathan. A sense of holy love broke upon us, a love that transcended romantic love, when the nurses placed David on Emily's breast. Nine days later, those memories were snatched away as I placed my son in his grave. To this day, the once glorious images of hospital nursery rooms, the scent of newborns, the sounds of infant cries, evoke memories of grief and death for me.

(b) Painful Irony: Should Loyalty Kill?

Even more grievous to David is the painful reminder that the thing that killed Jonathan was not his sin, but his loyalty. Jonathan considered his status as Saul's son to be his highest role in life. Instead of joining David in the wilderness, he stayed with his father in the royal court. Even when Saul charted a doomsday course for the royal family, Jonathan stood with him. And at last, at the end, he fell with him. What poignant dissonance is found in the Hebrew text, where the words life and death are carefully placed side by side as if to kiss one another: "beloved and pleasant in their life, and in their death they were not parted." Who could blame David for asking, Should loyalty have killed my friend?

Death has shaped the way David perceives the future, and it has equally colored how he looks at the past. Things which once evoked praise now evoke deepest sorrow.

So David turns to the present. But that is the most difficult area to negotiate, because that is where he must now live and survive.

III. Facing the Present: Ever-present Tears (1:24-27)

(a) Celebration Turned To Mourning (1:24)

"O daughters of Israel, weep over Saul,
Who clothed you luxuriously in scarlet,
Who put ornaments of gold on your apparel.

David addresses the daughters of Israel who sang the victory songs for him and Saul following their military exploits. He draws the women's attention to the clothes they are wearing: They are a reminder of Saul, the charismatic victor in war (clothed in Spirit), who clothed them with the spoils of victory. Now David says, "Weep, O daughters of Israel," because that charismatic figure is no more. By emphasizing the women's elaborate clothing, David may be making them uncomfortable by what is not stated: their dead king now lies naked, stripped in shame. Ironically this was foreshadowed when Saul was stripped naked before Samuel. The contrast accentuates the dissonance. The women's party clothing no longer is appropriate, therefore they must weep and rend their garments, as David has done.

Our world tries to numb its pain by partying. But David asks, "How can you celebrate when the king is dead?" How could the NFL continue to play when the President was dead? In those early years after the deaths of our children, Emily and I found it hard to enter into the Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays, because our son died November 4th, and our daughter Jessica on December 4th. Death casts a long shadow into our celebrations. In the midst of death the world tells us to dress up and go on celebrating, but the festivities only magnify the sorrow.

(b) A Crown At the Expense of Lost Love (1:25-27)

The poem concludes on the most poignant moment. Here the pronoun moves to the first person. The king's funeral is over. David stands alone at the grave and addresses his friend Jonathan.

"How have the mighty fallen in the midst of the battle!
Jonathan is slain on your high places.

I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan;
You have been very pleasant to me.
Your love to me was more wonderful
Than the love of women.
How have the mighty fallen,
And the weapons of war perished!"

Here is grief in its most personal, lonely state. Jonathan's title changes from "son" to "my brother." "I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan," says David. His sorrow is deep, personal, all-consuming. And his distress over Jonathan's death is magnified by the intensity of the love between them, a love he describes as wonderful, a love that transcends all romantic love. The word wonderful (Hebrew, *pala'*) was used of divine wonders, events like the Exodus, things that evoked awe, wonder and praise. When the word is used of man, it speaks of something outside his capabilities, something "too wonderful for me" (Deut 30:11). This gift of friendship is beyond the realm of human ability. It is love divine.

We can trace the development of that love between Jonathan and David in the three encounters which Jonathan had with the Philistines. In the first (1 Samuel 14), Jonathan was the charismatic victor. In the second (1 Samuel 17-18), he was the passive observer who lauded David as the new king. In the third (1 Samuel 31), he was the victim, the sacrificial lamb who died that David might have the crown uncontested. David cries out, "Is this the price of the crown, a lost love that was better than life?" What good is the crown when it comes at such a price? Do you think a day ever went by when Jonathan's death did not invade David's present?

How wonderfully free is the poet to express the tensions he feels in his soul. David gives voice to everything we have ever felt but did not sense we had permission to express. And he says it with painful honesty, in full view of the public, in the very presence of God. David confesses that Jonathan's death affects him in a comprehensive way: It cast dark clouds over the future, it colors the past, and it continually invades the present, where tears remain just beneath the surface.

When we sing this way, we confess the true value of life. Who dares sing today of unspeakable loss, of wounds which won't heal, of gaping emptiness?

Walter Brueggemann says we have nearly lost our capacity for such grief:

We are characteristically so busy with power, so bent on continuity, so mesmerized by our ideologies of control that we will not entertain a hiatus in our control of life to allow for grief. Although we may have lost our capacity for public grief, we still know from interpersonal relationships that where loss is not grieved there are barriers to newness. Through the eloquence of David, Israel lingers (long) in her grief unashamed ... David has such distinctive capacity for pathos. We speak too often of David dancing before the ark in his joyous nakedness. Here is the man utterly naked in his grief. Israel may be defeated but she is not muted. How like David we could be! How unlike David we are in our ideological, technological muteness. We imagine that the mighty do not fall, that the glory is not slain. We imagine if we do not say it, the Philistines will not notice. David knew better, sang better, and acted better. And so could we.[6]

As you read David's poem, let your soul weep.

Open yourself to their sacred memory,
And mingle your tears with theirs (Elie Wiesel).

Then write a lament of your own.

1. John Felstiner, *Paul Celan, Poet, Survivor, Jew*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995). John Felstiner spent sixteen years studying these poems of Paul Celan. He writes, "Out of darkness and wounding he made striking poems, which challenge the way of our world. In encountering these poems and becoming conversant with them, I have felt a grim energy verging on elation" (p xix).

2. The Septuagint renders the verb "proclaim" as *euangelizomai*, "*to announce good news*." See Isaiah 52:7.

3. Warriors used to rub their shields with oil before battle to make them slippery. Here the image of the absence of anointing oil may suggest the absence of the Spirit as well.

4. The word *defiled* means to abhor, loathe. The only other place this word is used prior to this text is Leviticus 26, where it is used five times (11,15,30,43,44) to explain God's *rejection* of Israel if Israel *abhors* Yahweh's statutes. Here the word carries much theological freight from the ancient Leviticus text. With that context in mind, the word implicates Saul for his previous disobedience.

5. Elie Wiesel, *From the Kingdom of Memory, Reminiscences* (New York: Schocken, 1990), 105-106.

6. Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), 1.

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