May 29, 2011

The National Presbyterian Church

A Song for Memorial Day

2 Samuel 1:1-4, 17-27

Rev. Patrick Willson

Monuments and memorials so abound here in Washington that on this Memorial Day weekend I feel compelled to speak of this most crucial remembering. Shortly after we moved to Williamsburg I brought my younger daughter to Washington for her first visit. We can do whatever you want to do, I told her, but there was one thing I wanted to do. I needed to go to the Vietnam Memorial. The names of two fraternity brothers are carved on that wall. I had been to their graves in West Texas, but this was something else.

Standing at the Vietnam Memorial, seeing myself reflected in the polished granite and touching those names I thought of David's lament, "How the mighty have fallen in the midst of the battle!" David's song, after you've heard it a few times, is one of those tunes you can't get out of your

head, and it seemed to me on this Memorial Day Weekend we might give our attention to hear that song clearly.

As the story goes, a messenger has come to David with the news that King Saul and Jonathan, who is Saul's son and David's dear friend, have been killed fighting the Philistines on Mount Gilboa. The messenger believes that he is bringing good news to David. For years Saul's madness and envy have kept David on the run. Now, with the deaths of Saul the King and Jonathan, the heir to the throne, all the obstacles which prevented David from becoming king have been cleared.

We might expect David to enter the Sanctuary of God most high and sing a song of praise and high rejoicing. After all, it was the LORD about fourteen chapters back in First Samuel who commanded that David be anointed king. David is God's choice, God's king.

David does not rejoice, however. Instead a howl boils up from deep within David. He gathers up his pain and grief, and he fashions them into a lament of such shattering beauty that the walls of God's house reverberate with it thirty centuries later.

David, it was said, was one "after God's own heart," and perhaps it is in this psalm we are able see that most clearly. David understands tragedy. He understands what it is to ache with loss. David embraces all of human life—and death—and does not turn his face from it. And he teaches us to embrace it as well. He sings:

> Your glory, O Israel, lies slain upon your high places!
>
> How the mighty have fallen!
>
> Tell it not in Gath,
>
> proclaim it not in the streets of Ashkelon.

This is a song for the people of God, a song for faithful people of a particular God. Only they will understand. Don't let the Philistines know, David sings,

don't let them catch you crying. There are people who do not understand tragedy and grief, who could only come to the wrong conclusions. Don't tell it in Gath, that great Philistine city, because there they would only say, 'Their God, the God of Israel can't help. That God doesn't make a difference. That God is defeated with Saul on the heights of Mount Gilboa. Where is your God, O Israel?"

In Gath they would be smug and slap a bumper sticker on their chariots saying, "If your God is dead, try mine!" In Gath they have a theology that deflects pain. They worship, a great, great god—a god who dwells high above every defeat and disappointment, a god unsoiled by suffering, a god unstained by tears, a god who knows nothing at all of death.

But: Tell it not in Gath, proclaim it not in the streets of Ashkelon.

Among yourselves, however, in the community of the faithful, weep, as you remember all which has been which will be no more.

Saul and Jonathan, beloved and lovely!

… they were swifter than eagles,

they were stronger than lions.

David invites us to join in his lament for Saul and Jonathan. And yet, this is not an invitation at all. This is a royal command. David is now King David. His first act as king is that people learn to grieve properly. "David intoned this lamentation . . .He ***ordered*** that [it] be taught to the people of Judah." Write this down and teach it to the people, King David commands, so they will know how to speak of their pain. David composes a song for Memorial Day. It is not a rousing patriotic melody, neither is it a sad dirge. It is a howl of pain to God on high because no one else is equipped to deal with our pain and loss.

At a worship conference a few years back a participant asked Paul Westermeyer, professor of worship

from Luther Northwestern Seminary, "What do you think about praise bands in worship?" Professor Westermeyer replied, "Praise bands are fine as long as you also have a lament band." Most of the psalms in our Psalter—though they are largely overlooked—are laments: a person or the people crying out to God in pain or loss or need and anguish. This psalm David screams is a lament, a cry of loss and agony. It is important for us to find the songs and symbols and rituals by which we may articulate our hurt.

Pain can silence us. We can lose so much that no words can be found to speak of it. The shock quiets us; we don't know what to say. I noticed that this week at Arlington National Cemetery. I fell into the company of a bunch of garrulous tourists. You might have thought they were going to Busch Gardens. On the shuttle bus they were loud and laughing and chatty, and I thought to myself, "This is going to be awful."

The cemetery did its work, however. As they drew near the graves they fell silent and spoke in hushed tones.

The poet Linda Pastan writes:

> If the language of war
> is victims,
> choose silence.[i]

The Vietnam Memorial was similarly quiet. People whispered. Someone described the Vietnam Memorial as looking like a wound in the earth. If so, it is a fitting symbol. The purpose of the memorial, we are told is "to heal the nation," and there is no healing without acknowledging the wound, no healing without telling the pain we feel. The way to healing begins by refusing to be silent. It begins in embracing a pain we will no longer ignore.

David commands that all the people learn to sing the song of lament. Make no mistake about it: David is no politician trekking through a military cemetery for a photo

opportunity, nor is he composing some sweet anti-war ballad on a guitar.

I had hoped to get by the State Department to see the memorial there, but security guards would not permit it. I told them that we allow people from the State Department to come to The National Presbyterian Church. Actually the security folks were most gracious and apologetic. No need to apologize, I said, I understand the need for security. We live in a difficult and sometimes dangerous time.

David lives in a difficult and almost always dangerous time. David is a warrior who knows firsthand the cost and casualties of war. He has led men into battle; he has bled; and he has trembled in the face of death. David knows the cost of war.

General Martin Dempsey, Chief of Staff of the Army, has four stars and assignment here in Washington, but the war is not far away. Each morning he opens a box and deals out a dozen laminated cards with the photographs and biographies of soldiers killed in action. On top of that box is written, "Make it matter."[ii] Wars will cost casualties but "make it matter."

David wants to make it matter. David does not come to Mount Gilboa to lay ceremonial wreaths; he comes to confront God with his rage and pain.

"You mountains of Gilboa," David addresses the heights themselves, "let there be no dew or rain upon you, nor bounteous fields!" Let the grass go unwatered lest it grow up and obscure what we must see. Let no rain wash away the dark stains on the earth. Let us see it all. A few years ago there was some controversy over a news photographer's pictures of flag draped coffins filling a aircraft hangar. On Mount Gilboa David demands we look at it all.

Look at it, David says. In "The Wasteland," T. S. Eliot's narrator says**: "**I had not thought death had undone

so many."[iii] David knows; David knows the cost of war; David knows the cost of peace; David knows the cost of the crown that has come into his hands; David knows the cost a free nation demands.

There, look: the bodies of the slain; and in the midst of all those they had slain, the bodies of Saul and Jonathan, the ones we have loved. Look, and remember: "Saul and Jonathan, beloved and lovely!" Their bodies lie close together:

> In life and in death they were not divided;
> they were swifter than eagles,
> they were stronger than lions."

David summons us to see it all, not to turn away. Remember their beauty and their strength.

David howls his anguish aloud on the heights of Gilboa. He screams out his loss and pain to whoever will hear. David's song is a lament, however, and in the Hebrew Bible, the lament, though it may be overheard by anyone and everyone, is addressed ultimately to God. To God David howls his pain.

Walter Brueggemann, retired professor of Hebrew Bible at Columbia Theological Seminary, has written:

> *The laments are addressed to someone! And precisely in the presence of God . . . is where the hurtful issues must be dealt with. Nowhere but with [God] does Israel vent her greatest doubt, her bitterest resentments, her deepest anger. Israel knows that one need not fake it alone. In the dialogue [with God], Israel expects to understand what is happening and even to have it changed.*[iv]

Articulating our pain, we muster hope that the bitter present may be transformed by God's future. Speaking of our wounds we hope for healing. Write down this lament,

orders King David, and teach it to the people so they may know how to speak their hurt before God.

There are not many places where we can speak of painful things and lost things. Too much in our society would shush us or comfort us with soothing optimism or seek to cheer us with the glib joke. Too many Christians would tell us "You can't talk that way to God!"

David, this one "after God's own heart," knows that there is a place where our pains and losses are respected and treasured, even as our joys and triumphs are valued. That is "the place of meeting" where we gather before the face of God. Here is the place "one need not fake it alone." Here one may be brutally frank without fearing to damage God. It is appropriate that David's great cry of grief interrupt our well-ordered worship. The King commands us. David, the one "after God's own heart," invites us to bring our wounds into the very house of God to seek God's healing. With the open declaration of all we have lost and all we grieve after we seek a fresh beginning.

David gives us courage to address ourselves to God with the confidence that God hears and cares and can change things. The Scriptures tell us David was one after "God's own heart," and we know we see something of that in the 23rd Psalm, "The Lord is my shepherd," but we see it also in this catastrophe of a song that David displays "God's own heart": "Your glory, O Israel, lies slain upon your high places!"

God's own heart embraces tragedy and tears, disappointment, even death.

Those who dwell in the Philistine cities of Gath and Ashkelon will never get it. They will suppose such songs of lament speak of broken faith. But "tell it not in Gath," rather teach it to the people of Judah, and sing it in the community of faith, for this is the way people talk who understand that God has promised to be their God in every

circumstance. This is the way worship sounds for people who would praise the one who was called a Son of David and who cried out in his own lament the words of his ancestor David: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" [Ps 22:1]

The Philistines mock and say, "Where is your God?"

And we say, here: here, in our worship; here, among the tattered bodies of the slain on Gilboa; here, among the suffering of the earth; here, in every place where people cry out in pain. The God who is like that is the only God that matters and the only God who can heal us. The God who is like that is the only God worthy of our praise.

Sunday Worship at 8, 9:15 & 11 a.m.

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[i] Pastan, Linda. "Silence," *Traveling Light* (New York: Knopf, 2011), p. 51.

[ii] Shanker, Thom. "Army's Leader Is Expected to Be Chosen to Head the Joint Chiefs of Staff, *The New York Times,* May 29, 2011, p. 17.

[iii] Eliot, T.S. *Collected Poems, 1909-1962* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1970), p.55.

[iv] Brueggemann, Walter, "From Hurt to Joy, From Death to Life," *Interpretation.* 28/1. p. 4.