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Bridge Street United Church
November 10, 2024
Readings: II Samuel 1:17-27; Psalm 71; John 15:12-17

Acknowledging Grief

II Samuel, chapter one, is a rare Biblical piece with its lament for those who died in battle. There are other Biblical passages that speak with sorrow about a lost battle and the effects of that lost battle for the people of Israel. But there is no passage of which I can think, other than this chapter, where one finds a lament over those who have been lost in a battle or in a war. That makes it an appropriate passage for this Sunday when we celebrate Remembrance Day within our worship service. But how David, in the passage, deals with the loss of Saul and of Saul's son, Jonathan, arguably David's closest friend, in battle offers much for us to think about not only in terms of Remembrance Day but also in terms of how we acknowledge our grief more generally in this time and place in our culture. We live in a time and in a culture in which there is a tendency to deny death and therefore to make acknowledging our grief more difficult.

Before I look at David's reaction to the deaths of Saul and of Jonathan, I need to provide some background. Saul was the people of Israel's first king. While Saul was reigning, the prophet Samuel, who on God's instruction had anointed Saul king, now, again on God's instruction, anoints David as king to replace Saul. According to the story as we find it in I Samuel, God had become displeased with Saul, and so had Samuel anoint David as king. But this choosing of David and his anointing as king is done secretly. Kings, especially in that time, did not take well to the idea that there was a successor from outside the royal family, a successor who had been chosen to take that monarch's place. Think, for example, of the story we hear each

year just after Christmas, the story about the reaction of King Herod when he heard from the magi, or the wise men, that a new king of the Jews had been born. Herod had all the children of Bethlehem who were two years of age and younger killed so as to ensure that he eliminated this new King of the Jews.

Saul, of course, does not know that David has been anointed as a future king of Israel. David becomes part of Saul's household, and David and Saul's eldest son, Jonathan, become fast friends. Saul becomes jealous of David's military prowess and begins to fear him. Saul, becoming increasingly paranoid, seeks on a number of occasions to kill David. Jonathan quarrels with his father over Saul's effort to kill David. Jonathan and David have developed a deep friendship, the kind of deep friendships soldiers in the same unit and enduring the same risks can develop. David flees Saul's court, and in the intervening time between then and Saul's death, Saul seeks David out to kill him. David, in that same time, has several opportunities when he could have killed Saul, though he chooses to spare Saul's life.

Then the Philistines, a traditional enemy of the people of Israel at this point in time, launch an attack on the kingdom of Israel. Saul, three of his sons, and the army of Israel, go out to defend their land. In a battle on Mount Gilboa, the Philistines defeat Saul and his forces. Saul, his three sons, and many in the army are killed. In this era, one of a king's chief responsibilities was to lead the army into battle. Saul had done that, supported by his three sons. Saul, despite the rather negative picture of him in I Samuel, had served loyally and bravely. His forces lost. However, the battle into which he led his troops probably saved his country from a greater catastrophe and provided a base from which David, after he was king, would defeat the Philistines.

Some features of David's response to Saul's death are instructive, both in the part of chapter one Judy read for us and in the earlier part of that chapter. In the earlier part of the chapter, the section before the part Judy read, we learn that David and his men tore their clothes, mourned, wept, and fasted, all traditional signs of mourning, "for Saul and for his son Jonathan and for the army of the LORD and for the house of Israel." Then David launches into that lamentation for Saul and for Jonathan, in the part of chapter one Judy read. It is a deep and moving expression of grief, grief at a national catastrophe, grief at the loss of his closest friend.

Now, some people have been skeptical about how sad David really was. After all, Saul's death removed the main block from David assuming the throne, namely King Saul, and David had not had to have any hand in it or anything to do with it. But I do not think that David is cynical here, even if we might live in a time when the death of a key leader sets off almost immediately a scramble for that position. There is no sign of David's leadership ambitions coming into play. I think what we see here is more akin to the sense of shock and mourning, not only in the United States but also in much of the western world, that followed the death of President John F. Kennedy. And David, I think, catches the national mood with his lament about the deaths of Saul, of Jonathan, of many members of the army, and also the defeat of the army. There is no sugarcoating what has happened, no effort to say "it was not as bad as it first seemed." "Your glory, O Israel, lies slain upon your high places! How the mighty have fallen!" David is not grieving alone here. He speaks in front of at least the band of men he has with him, but the crowd may have been larger. He certainly calls on the women of Israel to weep over King Saul, the king whose leadership has led them and the country to experience prosperity.

As I thought about this passage over the past while in the context of today's sermon, my mind went back to something I observed in the fall of either 2009 or 2010. I cannot be sure now

about the exact year, but I remember driving along Highway 401 on a cold November day. I was on my way to Toronto for a multi-day meeting. As I got to the exit for Colborne, I noticed a gathering of people lining the overpass, all looking east, the direction from which I was coming. A few had Canadian flags. It took me a few moments to remember that there was a repatriation ceremony that day. You may remember that the bodies of Canadian service personnel killed in the war in Afghanistan were flown to CFB Trenton, and then transported along Highway 401 to Toronto for autopsies. I realized I was driving probably about 30 minutes ahead of that procession that would soon be coming along Highway 401. These folks had gathered to honour those who had died, those whose bodies were in the procession that day. I saw the same scene at every overpass all the way to Oshawa, including, when I passed the most easterly of the Cobourg overpasses, the then mayor of Cobourg, someone I knew as an active United Church lay person with whom I had been in a number of regional church meetings.

I thought a lot at the time about what I saw that day, and I have thought about it more than a few times since. Why had people gathered in what were very significant numbers, and on a cold, windy day? It was not that they were there to honour someone from their community, for I saw the same scene at every overpass. The vehicles in the procession to Toronto were not going to stop to meet them. But those who gathered felt, I think, a need to recognize a loss, to honour a loss. They certainly were not there to celebrate a victory. But I think they were there to recognize a loss, even as David was leading people in a recognition of loss, the loss of their king, three of his sons, and other members of the army.

I think that that is what we are about here today, too. On Remembrance Day we are recognizing and remembering loss, and not just a loss of life, but the loss of a limb, or a person's mental well-being, different injuries—some visible and some invisible—that were the result of

service. It may not have, for us here today, the immediacy of the losses David lamented, or the strong, personal sense of his grieving for Jonathan, his closest friend. But we are recognizing losses.

There is another feature of this story from II Samuel that I think important to note today. Our faith tradition is one of the places where we talk, with more honesty than most other places in our contemporary society, about the reality of death and of the need to acknowledge it. That is what David is doing in this story. And he does it influenced by his tradition. Now you might point out to me David does not refer to God anywhere in his lament for Saul and for Jonathan. But I would argue that behind David's lament is a sense of God, of God's love, and care, and God's presence. David did not write all the Psalms. But he is almost certainly the author of a number of them. And in the ones he wrote, he both draws on that tradition in which he stands and adds to it.

I think it is not by accident that the Psalms—ancient Israel's book of hymns and prayers—contain some of the passages to which we turn in those moments when we need comfort, strength, to face the challenges of the moment. I have long had a practice, when I meet with a family about a funeral, to ask if there are any passages of Scripture they would like me to use in the funeral. It will not surprise you that the most commonly suggested passage is the 23rd Psalm. But what may surprise you is the number of other Psalms for which people will sometimes ask. Passages from the Psalms outnumber significantly the requests for a passage from one of the gospels or one of Paul's letters.

Perhaps it is because it is in the Psalms that we find some of the most direct pleas about what we need and also some of the most direct, specific expressions of God's care, love, and support. I think it is not accidental, for example, that a passage of Scripture closely associated in

the Christian tradition with Remembrance Day is Psalm 90, a Psalm that is the basis of the hymn with which we began this service.

Eugene Peterson is a scholar known to some of you, perhaps, as the author of the paraphrase of the Bible entitled *The Message*. In another of his books, *Working the Angles*, Peterson talks about the importance for us of what he calls “the previousness of God’s speech.” I want you to think about that concept for a moment—the **previousness** of God’s speech. To explain what he means by that term, Peterson uses as an analogy the way in which each of us learns to speak. Long, long before any of us ever utter a syllable, let alone a word, we have had many, many words said to us—by parents, grandparents, other family members, family friends. And eventually we learn to speak, the result of having been spoken to and heard in those words, at least most of us have, expressions of love and of care. And that process is why, of course, it is so important that we speak to children from the time they are born.

Peterson asserts that God has spoken to us long before we have known it, expressed love and care for us long before we have known it, and that the Psalms, including Psalms like Psalm 23 or Psalm 90, are places where we find some of our first and some of our most powerful language for answering God, for conversations with God. One of the things we bring to Remembrance Day, but also to other losses we face in our own lives—the losses of loved ones, the losses of our own aging, the losses of health, the losses of relationships—is the language and the resources of our faith tradition.

And David offered a lament. May we, too, use the resources of our faith tradition in the laments we need to offer. And to the God who comes to us through that tradition as a strengthening, comforting presence, to the one through whom we have seen that God most fully

revealed, and to the Holy Spirit, the presence of that God with us now and with us always, be all honour, glory, and praise, Amen.

Resources

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Peterson, Eugene. *Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987.

Roth, Brad. "Commentary on II Samuel 1:1, 17-27," in *The Christian Century* (June 2024, p., 29).

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/> [Accessed, November 4, 2024].