

“Love’s Lament”

II Samuel 1:1; 17-27

Stephanie Haskins

Before I begin, I’d like to thank the Bravo Channel for their contributions to this sermon. Their excellent programming is filled with enough theological fodder that I’m considering trying to deduct basic cable on my taxes for 2009. I’ll let you know how that goes. In the meantime, let me tell you why I appreciate Bravo, in case you’re interested. I’ve been watching old reruns of “The West Wing”, that show about well, the west wing of the White House--the president and his staffers and the dramas that inevitably ensue from having lots of power and relatively little time to exercise it. If you’ve seen the show, you know that the camera is always moving as staffers rush here and there, spewing out political jargon like really manic clones of George Stephanopoulos. For those of us who wonder from time to time what it’s really like inside the White House, watching “The West Wing” makes us feel closer to the action, even if we tacitly acknowledge that yes, we know it is all make-believe. Recently, Leo MacGarry, the former Chief of Staff to Martin Sheen’s President Bartlett, died suddenly, right before his election as the new Vice President. A few episodes later, the President and his staff gathered for Leo’s state funeral. I have something to admit here. As the President lifted his friend’s casket off the ground and helped carry it out of the church, I discovered there were tears streaming down my cheeks. I don’t know what it was: maybe it was the solemnity of a fictional state funeral, or the knowledge that in real life the actor playing Leo had died and his friends were reenacting an event that had occurred not long before, or perhaps Martin Sheen is just a really good actor. Whatever it was, the pathos caught up with me and for a few moments, President Bartlett’s grief touched some of mine.

Lament is like that. Lament is the word for this strange song that David sings and Anissa just read. In this summer sermon series on King David, we’ve been following David through a lot of action. Two weeks ago he was vetted by Samuel to be the next king of Israel and last week he proved his chops by killing the great Goliath. This week we find David in a rare stance of standing still and reciting what amounts to poetry. Our favorite alpha male is having a distinctly beta moment. In fact, David is having a moment more akin to the big aria in an opera—his chest heaving, his clothes in tatters, his face contorted and his breathing ragged. Think Maria Callas in her most gorgeous misery. This David, he wars, but he also sings, and oh, what a song.

“Your glory, O Israel, lies slain upon your high places! How the mighty have fallen! [...] You mountains of Gilboa, let there be no dew or rain upon you, nor bounteous fields! [...] Saul and Jonathan, beloved and lovely! In life and death they were not divided; they were swifter than eagles, they were stronger than lions. [...] How the mighty have fallen in the midst of the battle! [...] 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. How the mighty have fallen, and the weapons of war perished!”ⁱ

Did you notice, just now, the repetition of “How the mighty have fallen!”? Can you feel David’s outrage, and his grief? He calls for the mountains of Gilboa, the place where Saul and Jonathan died, to shrivel up and die too, because why should the land underneath the fallen thrive and grow?ⁱⁱ Elsewhere, David laments even the idea that his enemies, the Philistines, should be dancing in the streets over their victory. When the game is set up to declare a winner and a loser, celebration somewhere mocks tragedy somewhere else. By the time we reach the end, though, David’s hyperbole becomes more heartfelt. “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” (v.

26). Who was it whose memory inspired David and whose love surpassed that of women? Who was Saul, a man David describes as swifter than an eagle and stronger than a lion?

From his lament, you wouldn't know that more trouble came to David because of these men than anyone else, except perhaps himself. We didn't read all of those chapters in between last week and this week, and I doubt that even Aaron could speed talk his way through the rest of 1 Samuel like he did for the David and Goliath story. But it's important that we pay attention to Saul and Jonathan, because most of the time grief isn't general, it's terribly specific.

By the time he encounters David, Saul is a leader whose future has an inverse relationship to David's success. Saul's son Jonathan has declared his loyalty and friendship to David, and even Saul's people have moved on to greener pastures and bigger celebrities, singing "'Saul has killed his thousands, and David his ten thousands'" (1 Sam 18:7). To an aging monarch, this is what a trim waist and a robust hairline mock: not just the sense that youth has escaped him, but that youth has surpassed him. It doesn't take long for Saul's humiliation to drive him to desperate acts. While David plays his lyre in Saul's court, Saul tries to pin him to the wall with a spear (18:10-11). David is not David for nothin', so he's able to escape, but Saul pursues him across the chapters of 1 Samuel, trying but never quite managing to kill him. In between, Saul and David have several scenes of reconciliation, with David expressing his bewilderment at being pursued so relentlessly by Saul and Saul even repenting of his unholy obsession. But the repentance, however genuine it seems at the time, never quite takes, and David saves himself mostly by getting out of Saul's way. It must have been a relief, then, when David heard that Saul, his predecessor, mentor, father-figure and worst enemy was finally, mercifully, dead.

If David feels relief that Saul could no longer pursue him, the news of Jonathan's death must have been nothing less than devastating. Jonathan tried to save David's life as much as Saul tried to take it. Their friendship reads like a tragic love story; in fact, some interpret it as such. What we have are declarations of love and loyalty, of immediate bonds and elaborate plans to save our hero David from the evil machinations of Saul. This is a one-in-a-lifetime friendship for David. After Jonathan's death, David will not only become Goliath, he'll become Saul—growing fat, vengeful and scared. Although David will love others, only Jonathan loved David as he loved his own life (20:17). This love was a rare, precious thing, and as David discovers, something that can be lost just as inexplicably as it was found.

These are the men David laments and the subjects of the song he orders to be sung throughout Judah (II Sam 1:18). Their names will not be forgotten in history, their deeds will be memorized by schoolchildren and their loss will be felt not just by those who knew them, but by generations far removed by time and space. I think we know what David is trying to do here, even if the language is confusing and the geography unknown. This is memorialization, yes, but memorialization of grief, and not the tidy, public kind that we put on for the sake of others, but the raw kind we keep mostly to ourselves. Something in us understands the heightened emotion, the absurdity that life keeps going on—nature and everything else—so oblivious to the magnitude of loss that we feel with every breath.

David here is talking about people he loved—one easily, and one painfully, but grief doesn't have to just be about death. Often the losses we experience most acutely are not followed by dark clothes and caskets. There are friendships and relationships that slowly die away or sometimes never begin in the first place. There are dreams and jobs that end abruptly and children that disappoint or sadden. There are wars and catastrophes that we don't know how to put words to because we've pushed them away into the category of ancient history. Grief scares us, and not just because we're afraid of sadness. Grief scares us because it could overwhelm us. Grief scares

us because we could be challenged. Grief scares us because we could be implicated. Grief scares us because we could be changed.

Grief is a kind of power, but certainly not the kind that David chose to use often, even after the deaths of his friends. The next chapters following his lament show David continuing to fight with Saul's army, until they relinquish the claim to power and he officially takes over. We'll see what comes of that in the next few weeks. But to be fair to David, grief is not the kind of power that wins wars, ancient or modern, but it could be the kind that prevents them.

This is how in this moment, through this lament, David gets some part of this power thing right. And, not coincidentally, this is where David and Jesus share some common ground. In the gospels, there are no stories about Jesus slaying Goliath, or Jesus carrying on with Bathsheba, "The Da Vinci Code" notwithstanding. But there *are* moments of lament. Maybe you can recall a few of them yourself. Remember when Jesus' friend Lazarus dies and Jesus weeps before raising him from the dead? (John 11). Remember when Jesus rails against Jerusalem's pigheaded vulnerability: "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" (Luke 13: 34). And do you remember the lament of all laments in Mark when Jesus hangs on the cross and quotes David's own words: "'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'" (Mark 15:34). Before there was the king of kings, there was the king of Judah and they both knew how to lament. Judah's grieving king meant that centuries later, people who remembered David remembered his lament. And if David, the greatest and most macho of Israel's warriors and kings, could grieve, maybe God could, too.

We've been told that God is omnipotent, whatever that really means. But it seems more likely that the source of God's power, and our power, if we so choose, lies in our willingness to love and lose and then love again. The blessing of lament is the promise that when we lose, our voices are not the only ones crying out. Amen.

ⁱ All biblical quotations taken from *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, Oxford University Press (Oxford, 2001). These particular verses were selected from the scripture passage for editorial effect.

ⁱⁱ Walter Brueggemann, "First and Second Samuel," in *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1990), 215.