

Pentecost 4B
2 Samuel 1; Mark 5:21-43

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David Laments Saul's Death

After the death of Saul, when David had returned from defeating the Amalekites, David remained two days in Ziklag. ¹⁷David 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:

¹⁹Your glory, O Israel, lies slain upon your high places! How the mighty have fallen!

²⁰Tell 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.

²¹You 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.

²²From 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.

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

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

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

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

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

I almost feel like I should begin this sermon with an apology. Here you have come on a beautiful summer morning to worship God, to hear the gospel about God's love for you, and enjoy Christian fellowship, only to have the scripture readings talk about sickness and death. Those aren't topics we enjoy dealing with, much less thinking about. We hold them at arm's length as much as possible.

This dreaded duo of sickness and death doesn't care much about our feelings and wishes, however. Sickness and death don't bother to make appointments to see if it would be convenient for them to visit us. They often just barge right in and force themselves upon us whether we want them or not. Just here in our small St. Barnabas community, four people younger than me have started battles with cancer or leukemia in the past year. My heart is heavy this weekend because Randy Walker, Ben's football coach at Northwestern, died of a heart attack Thursday evening at the age of 52. That's the age I'll be next year. Sickness and death don't bother to make appointments.

I don't need to tell you that being a Christian gives us no advantage in avoiding sickness and death. Illnesses and accidents strike Christians and non-Christians alike. And the old proverb about the only two things that are inevitable for every person being death and taxes reminds us that death is a universal experience. Each one of us will someday encounter sickness and death. But we don't have to encounter these visitors unprepared.

I once heard someone suggest that one of the strengths of the liturgy – of having the discipline of a calendar with days like Ash Wednesday and All Saints Day, and a lectionary, a calendar of readings which compels us to read scripture passages which may not always seem relevant to us and indeed, may make us uncomfortable – one of the strengths of the liturgy is that it enables us to practice and prepare for the difficult times in our lives that will inevitably come. You may not be grieving a death or a broken relationship this morning, but I am grieving today and odds are that someone else here is also grieving. I may not be experiencing any serious health issues this morning, but odds are that someone here is. Paul gave this advice to the church community at Rome, “Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.” (Romans 12:15) That is exactly what the liturgy prods us to do, and so on a beautiful summer Sunday, even though it wasn't on your “to do” list when you got up this morning, we're going to practice preparing for sickness and death in all the many forms they take.

David's lament over the deaths of Saul and Jonathan and the story of Jairus and the woman with the hemorrhage are two examples of how we as Christians can appropriately respond when sickness and death show up at our door.

Saul was the first king of Israel and Jonathan was his first-born son and heir to the throne. After the young David killed the Philistine giant, Goliath, King Saul brought David into his court. David was initially a favorite of Saul, but when people began to celebrate David's exploits more than Saul's, Saul became jealous. On a couple of occasions, he threw a spear at David, trying to kill him. David finally had to flee for his life.

While in Saul's court, David had become best friends with Saul's son, Jonathan. Their friendship remained steadfast even when Saul was trying to kill David.

In a battle with the Philistines on Mt. Gilboa, Jonathan was killed and Saul, wounded and surrounded, committed suicide. When David learns of their deaths, he does something very natural – he grieves. He writes a lament, a song that expresses his sorrow.

The appropriateness of David's grief seems obvious. Two people he has been very close to have died and he is sad and angry. The reason I hold up David's grieving for us is because occasionally while working with a family who has experienced a death, I'll hear a well-meaning person say to someone who is crying, “Now don't cry. We shouldn't be sad because grandpa has died. We're Christians and we know that grandpa is in God's care, so there's no reason to be sad.”

That statement is only half true. It's true that grandpa continues to be in God's care, but that doesn't mean we should not grieve. Grandpa's relationship with God has not ended, but Grandpa's relationship with us has ended. The death of a loved one hurts for a long time, and we need not feel embarrassed or ashamed to have tears come to our eyes, even years later. When death comes, we should feel the freedom to be like David and publicly express our grief honestly. David lets it all out – he curses the Philistines and he curses the ground on which Saul and Jonathan died. He professes his love for them and he mourns and weeps and stops eating. That kind of grieving is normal for Christians and non-Christians alike and, as long as we don't get fixated in that stage, it can be healthy.

The apostle Paul gives this advice about grieving. He says, “Grieve, but don’t grieve as people who have no hope.” (1 Thessalonians 4:13) Christian grief is tempered by the sure and confident hope of the resurrection and the knowledge that nothing in all creation, not even death, can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. (Rom. 8:39)

In our gospel lesson a prominent leader of the community named Jairus and an unnamed woman approach Jesus with urgent pleas – “My daughter is dying. Please come and heal her.” “I have been bleeding for twelve years and I’ve become an outcast in my own community. Please restore my health.” Jesus heals the woman and brings Jairus’ daughter back to life after she has died. Our tendency is to see these as stories of Jesus’ power -- miracle stories. But the main point Mark is trying to make in telling this story is actually about the faith of Jairus and the anonymous woman and how they respond to their encounter with sickness and death.

English is a rich language. It has a wealth of words to choose from in expressing our thoughts. But for all its richness, English has no verb form for “faith”. In Greek and Hebrew, faith is a verb – something you do, not something you have. That’s important to know in this story, for when sickness and death confronted Jairus and the anonymous woman, they put their faith into action by coming to Jesus.

There was another option available to both of them. They could have responded with the opposite of faith, which is not unbelief, but despair. Despair, that feeling that life is meaningless and devoid of purpose, can creep into our lives whenever we realize that parts of our life are out of our control. It might be an illness or an accident or a job lay-off or feeling trapped in a relationship.

When faced with despair, a battle needs to be fought or despair will slowly consume us like a deadly parasite. Despair is not something we can fight by ourselves, for it is stronger than us. John Bunyan, in his classic story *Pilgrim’s Progress*, astutely depicts despair as a giant who lives in Doubting Castle. The main character, Christian, and his companion, Hopeful, are trying to make their way to the Celestial City, but on their way there they wander off the straight and narrow path. Unable to get back to the main road, Giant Despair captures them and throws them in his dungeon where he beats them mercilessly and assures them they will never leave Doubting Castle alive. Christian’s resolve weakens under the influence of Giant Despair and he is ready to give up, but Hopeful keeps Christian’s spirits up. One dark night Christian comes to realize that there is a way to get out of Doubting Castle, a way to escape the clutches of Giant Despair. The answer had been with him all along! Christian had forgotten that around his neck he had a key called Promise, and it opened up every lock in Doubting Castle. The key of Promise enables Christian and Hopeful to make their escape, leaving Giant Despair fuming behind them.

We, too, have a key called Promise, and it opens up a treasure chest full of promises. Here are three of them:

- Jesus’ last words in the Gospel of Matthew: “I am with you always, to the close of the age.” (Matthew 28:20)
- Paul’s words to the Romans: “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? No! For I am sure that nothing in all creation, not even death, can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:35-39)

- And Paul once again, this time to the Philippians: “I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound; in any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and want. I can do all things in him who strengthens me.” (Philippians 4:11-13)

Notice that Paul does not say, “I can do all things if I try hard enough.” It’s like the story of David and Goliath we read last Sunday. David doesn’t win that battle by his own efforts. David himself says, “The battle is the Lord’s.” Paul makes the same connection – “I can do all things *in him who strengthens me.*” That’s the key.

When I was in Wittenberg, Germany six years ago, I had the opportunity to visit the Castle Church where Luther preached and today is buried. On the 450th anniversary of the Reformation in 1967, the East German government took it upon itself to paint in large letters on the tower of the church the first line of Luther’s famous hymn, “A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing.” The Christians in Wittenberg, for whom the words were more than an advertising slogan, reportedly whispered among themselves, “The communists should have quoted from the first line of the second verse.” The translation of those words of Luther we sing this morning is, “No strength of ours can match his might! We would be lost, rejected.” But another English translation catches Luther’s intent a little better: “If we in our own strength confide, our striving would be losing.”

My hope for each of us is that we would never have to strive with sickness and death. But the reality is that we humans are fragile, mortal creatures – vulnerable to viruses and cancers and poor choices and anxiety and the laws of physics. Sickness and death are always at hand. We grieve and vent our anger when they show up – but, we do not fear and we do not despair, for the promise is sure – we have a God of love and mercy and, in him, we can do all things.