



WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN  
CHURCH

“The Next Step”

Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones

Scripture: 2 Samuel 1:1, 17-27

June 28, 2009

Is it not ironic – or perhaps the movement of God’s Spirit – that today’s lectionary reading from the Old Testament is a song of lament? If we were not in the throes of grieving the loss of our young pastor, Chad Miller, I would not have given this passage a second look. However, this Scripture from 2<sup>nd</sup> Samuel reminds us that it is natural – indeed, healthy – to grieve the loss of a loved one by giving voice to the pain and the sadness that reside within us.

The setting for the passage is this: the Israelites are at war with their perennial nemesis, the Philistines. The king of Israel, Saul, and his son Jonathan, have led the army into battle on Mount Gilboa. The fighting is fierce and the Israelites are crushed. Both Saul and Jonathan perish.

David, who will replace Saul as king, has been leading troops far to the south in a battle against the Amalekites. After defeating the Amalekites, a messenger comes to David and reports the disastrous news: King Saul’s army has been routed, and both Saul and Jonathan are dead.

Initially, David responds with shock and disbelief. He questions the messenger, saying, “How do you know that Saul and Jonathan have died?”

And isn’t that the way many of us responded when we first heard the news of Chad’s tragic death? “How do you know? Are you sure?”

And the disbelief has not fully subsided for all of us. In my head, I know Chad is gone, but in my heart, I still find it difficult to grasp. His office looks the same. His books and many personal items are still right where they have always been. My heart asks, “Will we never see him at his desk again? Will we never hear his laughter again?”

When the messenger confirms to David that Saul and Jonathan have perished, David rips his clothes and weeps. Tears flow when a loved one dies. They express our deep sorrow and relieve the stress that swells within us.

Much of the time we deny, or at least ignore, death. We think of it as something that happens to others. Some even believe that if they do what is right and believe what is right, God should spare them from intense suffering.

The story is told of a woman who carried her deceased child to Buddha and asked him to restore her child to life. He replied that he would bring her child back to life, provided that she would bring him a mustard seed from a household in which neither a parent nor grandparent, child nor brother, husband nor wife had died. The woman returned the next day, without her child’s body, but requesting to enter the monastic life. She had received an unexpected healing with the realization that death and grief are universal.<sup>1</sup>

No one is spared the mental anguish of losing a loved one. Everything that comes into being also perishes, so it is natural for us to mourn. In David's song of lament, he expresses his sorrow: "Your glory, O Israel, lies slain upon your high places! How the mighty have fallen!"

Three times he repeats this phrase, "How the mighty have fallen!" It expresses both his disbelief and his heartache.

David's lament also expresses his anger. He curses the mountain on which Saul and Jonathan have died. We can imagine David shaking his fist as he declares, "You mountains of Gilboa, let there be no dew or rain upon you, nor bounteous fields."

Anger is often a part of our grief. Acknowledged or not, some of us are angry at Chad. Perhaps you have found yourself saying, "Chad, the river was raging that day, why did you take such a risk?" Or perhaps your anger is directed at God. "Why did you let this happen? Why didn't you let Chad and his brother safely glide through the turbulent waters?"

I do not believe God controls the events of the world. In our freedom, we make mistakes and accidents occur. However, some believe that God controls every single event and blame God for disasters, even if indirectly.

In the first few days following the tragedy, some friends of Chad's parents went to their home to express their sympathy. But in their misguided theology, they said some very hurtful things. One said to Chad's mother, "God must have needed your boys more than you did." That comment pierced her soul. Another said, "God had a purpose for this. We just can't see it yet."

That is a reason many people give to explain suffering in a world created by a loving God. They reason that the current tragedy will open a door to something better.

I do not believe that God causes suffering in order to bring about something good. Chad's parents will have a chasm in their hearts the rest of their lives and no future good will entirely heal them.

Can suffering make a person stronger? Of course; but it can also break people. It drives some mad. Can God bring good out of this tragedy? Yes. I believe God will bring some good out of this awful accident. But I do not believe that God caused this disaster in order to bring about something good. I believe God shed tears with us over the deaths of Chad and Chris, and part of our healing results from God being with us in our pain.

David's song of lament over the deaths of Saul and Jonathan does not gloss over his pain or the pain of the community. He does not declare that it was all part of God's plan or that God allowed them to be struck down so that something better could emerge. Rather, David provides the people with words that help them express their agony.

It has been nearly three weeks since Chad and Chris drowned. Some wonder how long the period of grieving will last. Grief is unpredictable. If you break your arm, the doctor can give you a good idea of how long it will take before the bone is healed. But if you suffer a loss, your duration of grief will not adhere to a strict timetable. Sorrow comes and goes. Grief is like the tide. It goes out and comes back in. Each person's grief is different because each of us is unique and because each of us had a unique relationship with Chad.

I encourage you not to use the word "closure" when you talk about grief. For some there will always be a place of sadness in their hearts. While it is unhealthy to refuse to let go of pain and deep sorrow, it is unrealistic to think that sadness will entirely vanish. When a young person's life is cut short, there will always be a feeling of regret over what might have been. Our goal is not closure, but rather learning to live with a profound loss.

It is noteworthy that David's lament is not all gloom. He remembers Saul and Jonathan as gracious men who were adored. He declares that these two mighty men were "swifter than

eagles and stronger than lions.” David also recalls his personal connection to Jonathan and their deep love for one another.

One of the first steps of healing is relishing fond memories of loved ones who have died. Some remembrances will swell our eyes with tears, others will prompt a laugh. We need to remember Chad’s love of silence and meditative music, but also the time he played the part of a bungling fireman in the youth’s dinner theatre. We need to remember Chad’s gift for teaching the Bible, and for his starring role as the whale in the Chapel Club musical. For two weeks he would walk the staff hallway, stick his head into someone’s office, put on a serious face and deliver his lines, which consisted of “Glub! Glub!” He always got a kick out of being silly.

Holding tightly to special memories will not prolong our grief. Memories help us come to terms with our loss and restore our hope. Native Americans have a beautiful saying: “How can the dead be truly dead when they are still walking in my heart?” Chad will continue to touch us through our heartfelt memories.

After David’s song of lament and time of mourning, he returns to the business of living. He has not put Saul and Jonathan out of his mind and he has not simply gone back to living as he did before their deaths. This profound loss has changed him. But he also knows that he cannot stay in the past, or freeze his present state of grief, he must begin to move into the future. Our God is a God of hope who always calls for us to live the fullest lives possible.

John Buchanan shares a story about his good friend, Gary Hickok. A few years ago, Hickok’s life was cruising along smoothly when one day he started to get dizzy and have headaches. An MRI revealed that he had a brain tumor that had to be removed.

During a long and complex operation, the worst happened. In the process of removing the tumor, arteries and nerves around his eye were severed and, as the surgeons worked to try to correct the situation, he had a stroke. The surgery lasted 32 hours, and when he awoke he was blind in one eye, had very limited sight in the other, and was paralyzed on his left side.

Hickok said that it was the first time in his life that he genuinely understood what it was like to be in the valley of the shadow of death. Normally a strong, upbeat, resilient man, he sunk into the depth of depression. Confined to bed and a wheel chair, and with little prospect for improvement, he eventually gave up trying to get better. He even contemplated ending it all.

Then one day, his seven-year-old grandson visited him in the hospital. Hickok did not want to see anyone, but he finally consented to let his grandson come into his room.

After a few minutes, his grandson looked at him, and said, impatiently, “Grandpa, are you ever gonna get up out of that wheel chair? And the little boy’s words ignited something within him. He said, “Yes, Mike, as a matter of fact, I *am* going to get out of this wheel chair!”

And ever-so-slowly he raised himself up out of the chair and then he limped across the room. When he reached the opposite wall, he turned and said, “What do you think of that?”

Theologian, Karl Barth, once said, “Hope occurs in the act of taking the next step.”<sup>2</sup>

As we take the next step, we need to do it not individually, but together. Chad’s and Chris’s deaths brought our church family closer. During those first few disheartening days, we helped each other the best we could. We hugged, we shared, we listened, we sang and we prayed. One member said, “We became one enormous heart.” And it was that coming together that enabled us to survive the harsh blow.

However, what helped us survive the searing pain of that first week, was not only holding each other up, but also reaching out with compassion to Chad’s and Chris’s families. The love we poured out to them carried them when they had neither the strength nor the will to keep going.

On Friday afternoon, shortly after I thought I had finished this sermon, Camilla and I received a letter from Chad and Chris's parents. Here's the first paragraph: "I don't even know how to begin. When we arrived in Delaware on Saturday, we were sad, broken parents. By the time we flew back home on Monday, we were sad, broken parents with the tiniest glimmer of hope. Thank you for your generous gift of time, organization, love, support, acceptance, listening and hospitality. Thank you for flying us all back to Delaware to begin our healing among those who loved Chad best. We came reluctantly dreading to face our loss, and we left reluctantly dreading to leave such a loving, accepting atmosphere. Thank you."

Hand in hand and shoulder to shoulder, we can accomplish so much more than we can individually. There is a wisdom saying from the people of Kenya: "Those who want to go fast, go alone. Those who want to go far, go together."

#### NOTES

1. Bruce Epperly, "Lectionary Commentary," on the *Process and Faith* website for July 2, 2006.
2. This story was shared by John Buchanan, in his sermon "In the End, Our Beginning," November 15, 1998.