

The Song of the Bow

Sermon by Pastor Patricia Geiseman

Pentecost 6

June 30-July 1, 2018

2 Samuel 1:1, 17-27

We have a flagpole in the corner of our front yard. The flag stays up day in and day out, all year long. There is a spotlight below illuminating the flag at night. The berm around the pole is planted with perennials. Once in a while we thin them out and pull some weeds. But, mostly, the flagpole, flag, and surrounding flora receive little attention.

But as I drive around, I often see flags flying at half-staff, at post offices, fire stations and other public places. Recently, flags flew at half-staff after the death of former first lady, Barbara Bush.

This half-staff tradition began in the seventeenth century to make room for the “invisible” flag of death. It is a symbol of respect, mourning, or distress. Legally, we are to fly flags at half-staff on Memorial Day from sunrise to noon, then full-staff from noon to sunset. Also flags fly at half-staff on Patriot Day on September 11 and on Pearl Harbor Remembrance Day on December 7.

In March of 1954 President Eisenhower issued an official proclamation about when and for whom the flag shall be moved. But one website I read said, “An easy way to remember when to fly the flag at half-staff is when the whole nation is mourning.”

This coming week July 4 will arrive, and we will celebrate Independence Day as a nation. There will be picnics and parades, festivities and fireworks. The flag, according to protocol, shall fly at full staff. But perhaps, given the level of grief, this year it should fly at half-staff.

This weekend we continue in our summertime journeying through the semi-continuous readings in Hebrew Scripture. Last week we heard the story of David and Goliath, of the shepherd/slinger boy who used what he had to conquer the Philistine warrior. We concluded that when we share what is God’s, the whole world wins. And it is, indeed, “*Wonder–full!*”

The story moves forward, and sadly, to this weekend, not to another victory, but to a devastating defeat. Our lesson is a lament of David’s grief over the death of King Saul and his son Jonathon. They were father/mentor, companion/brother to David.

David’s grief is both personal and public. He expresses the sorrow of his own broken heart over a dead king and prince, and the deep grief of defeated Israel.

Together they grieve over what was lost. It is the end of an era.

The song is not a psalm but a poem: The Song of the Bow. David speaks with heartfelt hyperbole. Walter Brueggemann sagely suggests that we learn from David's sad song:

This poem is a useful model for public grief among us. We are busy with power, so bent on continuity, so mesmerized by our ideologies of control, we will not entertain a hiatus in our control of life to allow for grief.

Brueggemann adds that:

We may have lost our capacity for public grief. However, we know from our own lives and relationships that where loss is not grieved there are barriers to newness. [1]

An old Russian song asks, "To whom shall I tell this heartache?"

Anne Lamott wrote, "You will lose someone you can't live without, and your heart will be badly broken." [2]

Indeed! Grief is a form of love.

If we do not know how to grieve, there is something unleashed in our psyche . . . we can become angry, depressed, numbing habits can form . . . addictions and the occlusion of real feelings. What comes of suppressed sorrow isn't good! Behaviors, such as constantly criticizing others, strife, endless complaints and lack of peace.

The search for emotional space to face and heal from heartache should not have to feel eternal!

What we grieve over reveals what we value. [3]

David's grief is complicated. His relationship with Saul and Jonathon had been close: fatherly and brotherly, and broken by betrayal and contempt. It is sad but true that even our closest relationships are often VERY complicated: connected with care and commitment, and torn with doubt and deception.

The story and the song tell us that David is man with an ego. However, here he has the capacity to think and speak beyond himself. He puts aside power for a full honoring of grief. His song of lament gives the community time, space, and means to treasure and to let go.

Still, the mighty fall. Ideals, principles, values, and virtues waver in the wind of political turmoil and national unrest. This July Fourth could serve us well as a time to allow our hearts to be sad, to remember the losses and failures in our land, without rancor or blame.

Lament keeps us humble, honest and human.

As we fire up the grill, drink wine coolers and beer, play games and watch fireworks, we can remember and lament: How the mighty have fallen!

We remember the voices not readily heard...

We remember Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee.

We remember slavery, and the silence of the American church during the holocaust.

We remember Japanese internment camps, Vietnam, Afghanistan, gun violence, ongoing bigotry, and border battles.

We lament the losses. And, dear God!, we lament the hatred!

We let go of presumed power, opinions, and blame.

We acknowledge the mighty have fallen.

In our song of sadness—The Song of the Bow—our tears may clear our vision.

The news is full of stories of angry chanting, harassing people, vulgar celebrities, and intimidation. Indeed, “Public tantrums are bad politics.”

Just because we have the rights to hector and insult public figures, doesn't mean it's a good idea. When we go down this road “democracy dines in the darkness.” [4]

Surely we cannot ignore bigotry and bad behavior.

Surely we are not in denial, we do not live in la la land. We recognize hatred is at its height, civility and comity of nations have completely broken down. Americans are at each other throats. [5]

Instead of being divided BLUE or RED . . . what if we are red, white, *and* blue? What if we lament, put down pens and voices of hatred? And . . . fly the flag at half-staff?

In David's Song of the Bow, all are summoned to grieve: the contemptible daughters of Philistia, the bereft mountains of Gilboa, and the well-off women of Israel wearing expensive clothes.

Walter Brueggemann writes that David's lament “guides us to remember”:

- **Words matter.** Sound religion is so often a matter of finding the right words, words that will let us genuinely experience, process, and embrace the edges of life. The cruciality of words needs be at the center of the church's life. Culture wants to silence all serious speech, cover over all series loss, and deny all real grief. Silence will leave us numb, unable to hope or care. So we are honest with

ourselves in this place, through the Bible stories, through liturgy, hymnody prayers, preaching, and communications—and continually seek the right words.

- **David sorted out what was crucial and what was marginal.** Saul's death was hugely personal for David. Everything changed! Yet he sets aside himself and focuses on the community, on the reality of public loss. He grieves greatness that is lost. He speaks beyond himself, of greatness he can neither enhance nor diminish.
- **Public grief is a scarce practice.** We cannot pretend everything is all right. We remember long history of wars not as a set of triumphs, but an endless process "bow against fat" ... "Sword into blood. Still, as in David's day, outsiders mock and haughty insiders consume more... and do not notice. [6]

In 1953 President Dwight Eisenhower worried about the direction the United States and other nations were taking: "Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed. This world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children." [7]

The text is about NOTICING. Notice grief and loss. Ask: What permits this? How can we break our own silence?

We can join the song of faith. Unresolved hurt can be resolved.

So hear my song, O God of all the nations,
a song of peace for their land and for mine.

This is my prayer, O God of all earth's kingdoms,
your kingdom come; on earth your will be done.
O God, be lifted up till all shall serve you,
and hearts united learn to live as one. [8]

David's lament summoned Israel to notice the hurt. To embrace the defeat and, in time, to act beyond the loss.

David's sad song summons us to notice, to sing along. To see loss and injustice, division, hatred, past and present. Personal and public . . . to fly the flag of our hearts at half-staff . . . to be humble, honest and human.

We can put down our weapons of judgment and hostility and let go of ego and control and admit we need healing, help and hope.

The Whole Story tells us that the Word does indeed come and dwells among us shining light that the darkness cannot overcome.

David picked up the mantle of the *anointed one* to carry on. He became the king.

So we take time to mourn, to remember the best and to grieve the rest—for our country and for ourselves.

We, too, are anointed with power to carry on in our lives and in our world.

We, too, are invited to sing the song.

[sung by the congregation]

O beautiful for patriot dream that sees beyond the years
Thine alabaster cities gleam, undimmed by human tears;
America! America! God mend thine every flaw,
Confirm thy soul in self-control, thy liberty in law. [9]

Amen.

REFLECTION:

- *What are you lamenting? For yourself? For our country?*
- *How can our prayers and songs of sorrow support those who are suffering?*

Resources:

[1] Brueggeman, Walter, *1 & 2 Samuel*, page 214

[2] Lamott, Anne, "An Homage to Age and Femininity," *O Magazine*

[3] Simpson, Eric, "Blessed Are Those Who Mourn: A Christian Understanding of Grief," huffingtonpost.com, May 25, 2011

[4] "Incivility won't build Democrat's blue wave," James Robbins, *USA Today*. James Robbins is also the author of *Erasing America: Losing our Future by Destroying Our Past*.

[5] Gerson, Michael, "Trump now has a path to uniting party," *The Daily Herald*, June 27, 2018

[6] Brueggemann, Walter, *1 & 2 Samuel*, pages 217 and 218

[7] Carter, Jimmy, *Faith: A Journey for All*, page 135

[8] "This Is My Song," text from verses 2 and 3, by Lloyd Stone and Georgia Harkness, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, #887

[9] "O Beautiful for Spacious Skies," verse 3, text by Katherine L. Bates, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, #888

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