

This is My Song  
2 Samuel 1:1, 17-27

Each time I've re-read the appointed scripture for this holiday weekend, I found myself becoming tearful, and a lump formed in my throat. Here, in the books of the prophet Samuel, we find the stories of nation-building: the hardship and the courage of generations who strived for the best they could envision, for God and for a home.

While these Biblical stories remind us that God's people don't always have the best vision, they often inspire hope and share wisdom. We should sing a song of Alleluias in celebration of such national aspirations! Yet the lectionary leads us first to another sort of hymn: *The Song of the Bow*:

Your glory, O Israel, lies slain upon your high places!  
How the mighty have fallen!  
Tell it not in Gath...  
or the daughters of the Philistines will rejoice...  
Saul and Jonathan, beloved and lovely!  
In life and in death they were not divided;  
They were swifter than eagles, they were stronger than lions.  
O daughters of Israel, weep over Saul...  
How the mighty have fallen in the midst of the battle!  
Jonathan lies slain upon your high places.  
I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan;  
Greatly beloved were you to me....  
How the mighty have fallen, and the weapons of war perished!

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How can we NOT feel the grief of David as we hear his song of lament? His dirge? This eulogy in prayer and poetry?

How can we NOT mourn with him the lost love of friendship? The fierce ache of a slain mentor and king? The grief of a hoped-for future no longer possible?

How can we NOT empathize with this warrior, this friend, this man – when we have all known our own losses?

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One of the challenges of preaching a particular text each week is that these stories encompass *so much more* than the few verses chosen. The books of 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Samuel were really written as ONE book, one story broken into two arbitrarily for the sake of length. And so, to understand more about David's lament – and more about his relationships with Saul and Jonathan – we must look back into his story.

Saul, the first King of Israel anointed by God's prophet Samuel, took young David under his wing. While in Saul's service, David developed a deep bond of friendship with Saul's son Jonathan.

But, through the very prophet who revealed him King, Saul eventually learns that his monarchy will not extend through his sons.

Rather, God has intended the reign over Israel to continue through David.

For a father and a man who struggled to bring the tribes of Israel together, this imminent loss of his family's legacy is unacceptable!

So begins Saul's pursuit to end David's life;

and his son Jonathan's attempts to remain loyal to both father and friend.

David must flee to a foreign land and a foreign king – but his hope always remains with Israel and its future.

There is no happy ending for this part of the story. And so we enter the scene of tragedy – today’s reading.

Despite his many attempts at killing David, Saul receives a sincere song of mourning.

You see, David has never perceived himself as an enemy or traitor – in fact he has attempted several times to prove otherwise<sup>1</sup>.

It seems he has just been on the poor side of politics.

Knowing the context – Saul’s rage and David’s flight – some might read this passage and wonder: *Is David’s mourning acceptable?*

Despite his love for nation and dedication to Israel’s God, *David has been fighting alongside the Philistine army!* That very tribe who directly caused the death of the King and his heirs!

How can David claim any genuine loss? How can he call for the people to weep with him?

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War is ugly. No matter if it is

ancient story,

U.S. history

or present reality.

It makes us look at our neighbors who hold different perspectives and wonder at their motives, their sincerity.

Early last month I read a Coloradoan letter to the editor wondering aloud about the motivation behind the Memorial Day weekend’s *Doonesbury* comic strip.

Garry Trudeau’s strip showed drawings of one soldier offering a salute and another bugling in tribute.

Then came row upon row of names –

names of U.S. soldiers who have died in Iraq and Afghanistan since April 2005.

The letter to the editor’s point was to question Trudeau’s memorial, considering the artist’s [quote] “way-left-of-center” politics.

Was Trudeau using his strip to make a political point, or was he honestly lamenting the deaths and honoring the dead & their families?

Must we separate the two? If we hold as our truth the injustice of a war, *can we not then remember with sincerity those who fought in it?*

War is ugly!

It turns father-figure against son:

as with Saul’s conviction that David stood against him;

as perhaps you differ from your parents’ or mentors’ points of view, and so often Fourth of July family celebrations may carefully avoid all talk of religion or politics.

War tears beloved friends apart:

Jonathan and David struggled to maintain their loyalties;

and we, who are friends in this room, can sometimes hold onto our disagreements – about the Iraq war or other charged issues we hold dear.

Even this weekend’s celebration of our independence, I believe, must honor the individuals who stood on both sides of the revolutionary debate:

devotion to the empire from which they came and where some of their families remained, or self-governance of the states?

Can we still love one another amidst our differences? Of course we can.

**But can we also allow one another to experience conflicting emotions?** To honor our truths according to our love and loss? Our values and dreams?

*War is ugly!*

*But it is a part of our past and a part of our present. It is a part of our story, and we must acknowledge all sides of it.*

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So David, forced out of Israel by politics, despite his continued love for homeland and King, was fighting for the “enemy”.

The Philistine King of Gath even praised David to the other Philistine lords when they worried over his allegiance:

“Is this not David, the servant of King Saul of Israel, who has been with me now for days and years? Since he has deserted to me I have found no fault in him to this day”<sup>22</sup>.

But later, once David began his mourning over Saul & Jonathan, could the Philistines possibly have trusted him again?

And his own people, Israel – what might have been their response to David’s call to weep with him, knowing as they did of his estrangement from the King?

Perhaps they were ALL asking: How does his song make sense?

Have you ever found yourself split apart like this?

Your loyalties questioned by all sides because you continue to love your enemy? Or because you feel you should celebrate but your gut calls for mourning?

What right does David have to sing a song of lament when the battle succeeded for *his* side and for *his* future as King?

*The right of a sincere love and loss.*

The right of one who hoped for a future that now will never be: reconciliation with his King and reunion with his beloved friend.

The depth of his expression of loss,

the beauty of his imagery

and the repeated utterance,

*“How the mighty have fallen” –*

these are not shouts of victory!

This is a song of lament. This is David’s song... and it is true.

Yes! David will be King;

he has been vindicated for the wrongs his government has perpetrated against him.

He can step into a new future now...

but not until the lost one is mourned.

...We often forget how necessary it is

to “sing publicly of our hurts

as it is [necessary] to sing of our triumphs.

It is only by acknowledging the depths of loss

that we can open to God’s new thing in our midst”<sup>23</sup>.

For that is ever our hope and our celebration – that God will do a new thing, through our history and into our present.

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And so I sing a song of lament for today:

O God of Israel and God of David,  
 God of Saul and Jonathan  
 and MY God:

I sing a song of longing.

How I long for the days of peace that you have promised.

How I long for the day when my neighbors will not question where my heart lies when I tell them openly that I love them; that I disagree with them, and I hope the best for them and for me.

You have blessed me to experience freedom and  
 the ability to pray your name as I have known you;  
 to walk the path you have shown me;  
 to answer your call with my own voice.

But I long for the celebration of your day of promised peace,  
 of the lamb lying down with the wolf;  
 of freedom for all people everywhere –  
 freedom from the prisons we create for ourselves and for others. Freedom for all creation, that we might  
 live in sacred harmony with all that you have called “good” from the beginning.  
 I give thanks for and I *want* to celebrate freedom!

But today is only July 2<sup>nd</sup> – and I need not choose ***either/or*** in my emotions! I HAVE TIME for this song  
 of lament before the celebratory sound of fireworks inspires my shouts of joy!

I have time to mourn the many losses that come with my country’s victories –  
 even the victory of independence.

I mourn the losses by death, yes, but also the broken friendships and family ties.  
 I lament the loss of great hopes and visions of a future that must be buried  
 before I can greet your new day.

But just as the end of Saul’s reign ushered in a new future,  
 just as David became king, enabling his line to extend to Joseph, and on to Jesus;  
 just as you have given hope to all these  
 I know you have a future for me and for your church.

Today I sing my lament,  
 and tomorrow I will celebrate.  
 I will celebrate the END of war,  
 and remember that you have given us the power to know  
 peace on earth through your presence in the world:  
 through Jesus Christ.

This is my song.  
 Amen.

<sup>1</sup> 1 Sam. 24:5-16, 26:6-20.

<sup>2</sup> 1 Sam. 29:3.

<sup>3</sup> Bruce C. Birch, "The First and Second Books of Samuel" in *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes, Vol. II* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998).