

“Agony and Ecstasy”  
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II Samuel 1:1, 17-27  
San Dimas Community United Church

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I really should have titled this sermon only “agony” rather than “agony and ecstasy” because the ecstasy of David’s kingship is yet to come. Today’s text is the first of a series to come where we are invited to examine God’s acts in history through the life of David. What we have in the beautiful poetry of this week’s text is a lament of pure grief; David teaches us that grieving is required before any ecstasy can be claimed.

Here’s the background: Israel has been governed by spiritual leaders, charismatic judges, who would rise up when needed to address these tribal peoples with God’s message and direction for them and protect them. There was no established kingship; and yet, the people thought they should be like the nations surrounding them; they should have a king, too! Though they were told this wouldn’t be a good idea, they nagged until they got their way, and Saul became their first king. But Saul fell prey to making his own decisions rather than listening to the voice of God, and so, his kingship was doomed.

In the meantime, a successor had been chosen, David, who came to live with Saul and Saul’s son Jonathan. As time passes and Saul knows his kingship is doomed, he intuits David as a threat to him, and the two dance the dance of power falling and power rising with Jonathan stuck in the middle. Saul and David are now in opposition; yet David, upon hearing of Saul and Jonathan’s deaths, is heartbroken. There is no rejoicing; David doesn’t breathe a sign of relief that now Saul and Jonathan do not stand in his way of political advancement. David knows that that these two men who instruments of God, chosen to work God’s will in history, and now they are no more.

Rather than a poised acceptance speech of his own kingship, David, who knew and loved both Saul and Jonathan, does not shy from expressing this love with this beautiful poetry.

***Your glory, (glory meaning Saul and Jonathan) O Israel, lies slain upon your high places! How the mighty have fallen!***

***Tell it not in Gath, proclaim it not in the streets of Ashkelon; or the daughters of the Philistines will rejoice...*** (David does not want the enemies of Israel to gloat.)

***You 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.*** (Here David curses Gilboa, the place where Saul was killed.)

***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, who clothed you with crimson, in luxury, who put ornaments of gold on your apparel. How the mighty have fallen in the midst of the battle!***

(David calls for the professional mourners (daughters of Israel) to come out and grieve; no ordinary human grief can fully acknowledge the immensity of the loss of their deaths.)

***Jonathan lies slain upon your high places. 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.*** (Comrades in war have a special devotion to one another that is beyond ordinary relationships.)

***How the mighty have fallen, and the weapons of war perished!***

We as people and as a nation have not typically done very well at expressing grief. We try to keep our emotions in check for fear they will overtake us and we will lose control of ourselves and our lives. Often grief is mitigated by nice words; sometimes the words are too nice, like when a couple has a miscarriage and is told “you’ll get pregnant again” instead of empathy given to the great loss of the moment. Then there’s the well wishers who want to introduce a grieving spouse to a new prospective love instead of honoring the love that is lost and the heart that is broken. And there’s the encouragers who say “just don’t think about it,” which usually compels us to think about our loss that much more because deep down we know this grief and loss must be reckoned with.

I do not want to suggest that we should stay in the valley of the shadow forever, but rather that we truthfully honor our losses and grieve them like David showed us how to do, because until we come to

terms with loss, it is difficult to move into a new future. These God-given emotions serve a purpose, a purpose to heal and make whole, to place a protective scar over an open wound so the wound will not fester.

Yesterday was July 4th and we celebrated our great country! How blessed we are! Why me, why was I so fortunate to be born in the United States? We give thanks for the sacrifices of so many who have brought us to this day in history. We honor them through our service to live faithfully the dream of this nation. We are awed with wonder at the spacious skies and golden fields of grain, the resources of land and people.

Even so, we would do well to listen carefully to David and to learn to grieve our losses so that we can move forward and not simply repeat the past. Kingship for Israel meant the end of “small government” -- no more temporary spirit-filled judges called on when needed. From the anointing of the first king, Israel made a choice that posed temptations for their nation to look to their kings rather than looking to God. They often ignored the enduring question of who would rule over them--God or king. Now, it is true that King David’s heart was close to God initially, and yet as this story unfolds in the weeks to come, even this pure-of-heart shepherd boy is lured by power. At his best, King David uses his “big government” to extend God’s justice. We shall see in the weeks to come what happens when he uses his power for his own designs.

But for today we stay in the purity of grief, honoring our losses, not moving too quickly to the ecstasy of God’s future. But we stay in the purity of grief shared by families whose sons and daughters are now dead or permanently wounded because of war; we must not ignore them, but rather honor them and serve their needs all the days of their lives.

We must grieve that our economic system gave opportunity for the greedy who have caused so much economic heartache, such as the victim of Bernard Madoff who told the court that she now survives on food stamps and scavenging dumpsters at the end of the month when her food stamps are used up. We must pay attention and grieve that our state is in economic disaster and now chooses to cut education and much needed public services. If we do not face our failings, admit our mistakes, and grieve for the pain they cause, how are we to know what to do in the future? It seems the human propensity is to not admit failure nor to grieve because some how that will make us weak. Instead, admitting how we failed or our losses can lead us to the way to be whole again. Grief and truth can indeed make us strong!

In a few moments we will sing “America the Beautiful” -- one of our favorite national hymns. And I like the old familiar words--that’s why we’re singing those words rather than the words in our hymnal. But, I also resonate with the poetry of the words in our hymn # 594 which you might want to look at. The first verse there sounds familiar. In 1993, however, Miriam Therese Winter wrote the following verses:

***Indigenous and immigrant, our daughters and our sons: O may we never rest content till all are truly one. America! America! God grant that we may be a sisterhood and brotherhood from sea to shining sea.***

***How beautiful, sincere lament, the wisdom born of tears, the courage called for to repent the blood-shed through the years. America! America! God grant that we may be a nation blessed with none oppressed, true land of liberty.***

***How beautiful, two continents, and islands in the sea that dream of peace, nonviolence, all people living free. Americas! Americas! God grant that we may be a hemisphere where people here all live in harmony.***

In the end of the day, grief, penitence, and truth-telling brings us to that place of humility and acceptance where we know that we cannot go it alone, but that it is in God that we place our trust, that in God’s righteousness true power lies, and that our future is inextricably linked with God’s future. Whenever we reach that place of humility and trust, our souls can find true peace and the greatness of our nation can truly shine bright for all to see. Amen.