

OUT OF THE DEPTHS

A sermon preached by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno August 29, 2021

Psalm 130 2 Sam 18:5-9, 15, 31-33

I don't know if you've ever heard the name, William Sloan Coffin, but for my money, he may have been the best preacher of the last century. As I open this sermon on our text from 2 Samuel on the loss of David's son, Absalom, I want to quote extensively from Coffin's most famous sermon, titled, *Eulogy for Alex* delivered ten days after his son was killed in a car accident when Bill Coffin was pastor of Riverside Church in New York City. Here's how he began

As almost all of you know, a week ago last Monday night, driving in a terrible storm, my son — Alexander — who to his friends was a real day-brightener, and to his family "fair as a star when only one is shining in the sky" — my twenty-four-year-old Alexander, who enjoyed beating his old man at every game and in every race, beat his father to the grave.

Among the healing flood of letters that followed his death was one carrying this wonderful quote from the end of Hemingway's "A Farewell to Arms":

"The world breaks everyone, then some become strong at the broken places."

My own broken heart is mending, and largely thanks to so many of you, my dear parishioners; for if in the last week I have relearned one lesson, it is that love not only begets love, it transmits strength.

When a person dies, there are many things that can be said, and there is at least one thing that should never be said. The night after Alex died I was sitting in the living room of my sister's house outside of Boston, when the front door opened and in came a nice-looking, middle-aged woman, carrying about eighteen quiches. When she saw me, she shook her head, then headed for the kitchen, saying sadly over her shoulder, "I just don't understand the will of God." Instantly I was up and in hot pursuit, swarming all over her.

For some reason, nothing so infuriates me as the incapacity of seemingly intelligent people to get it through their heads that God doesn't go around this world with God's fingers on triggers, God's fists around knives, God's hands on steering wheels. God is dead set against all unnatural deaths. Christ spent an inordinate amount of time delivering people from paralysis, insanity, leprosy, and muteness.

Which is not to say that there are no nature-caused deaths — I can think of many right here in this parish in the five years I've been here — deaths that are untimely and slow and pain-ridden, which for that reason raise unanswerable questions, and even the specter of a Cosmic Sadist — yes, even an Eternal Vivisector. But violent deaths, such as the one Alex died — to understand those is a piece of cake. As his younger brother put it

simply, standing at the head of the casket at the Boston funeral, "You blew it, buddy. You blew it."

The one thing that should never be said when someone dies is, "It is the will of God." Never do we know enough to say that. My own consolation lies in knowing that it was not the will of God that Alex die; that when the waves closed over the sinking car, God's heart was the first of all our hearts to break.

With my daughter now battling breast cancer at the age of 33, I'll tell you, the texts this morning resonate with me, as the lectionary often does. She's doing well, but I am thinking about mortality all the more when those I love are stricken.

Forgive me for giving you the details once again from the story of the loss of David's son Absalom, but detail is what makes literature rich and this part of the scripture is rich with detail.

And the king ordered Jo'ab, "Deal gently for my sake with the young man Ab'salom."

6: So the army went out into the field against Israel; and the battle was fought in the forest of E'phraim.

7: And the men of Israel were defeated there by the servants of David, and the slaughter there was great on that day, twenty thousand men.

8: The battle spread over the face of all the country; and the forest devoured more people that day than the sword.

9: And Ab'salom chanced to meet the servants of David. Ab'salom was riding upon his mule, and the mule went under the thick branches of a great oak, and his head caught fast in the oak, and he was left hanging between heaven and earth, while the mule that was under him went on.

The king's General, Joab, who was not of the same tender mind as the boy's father, had ten men dispatch the helpless young man. Now hear again the pathos of the king as he learns of the deed.

The king said to the Cushite, "Is it well with the young man Ab'salom?"

Do you hear a father's slender hope in that question?

And the Cushite answered, "May the enemies of my lord the king, and all who rise up against you for evil, be like that young man."

33: And the king was deeply moved, and went up to the chamber over the gate, and wept; and as he went, he said, "O my son Ab'salom, my son, my son Ab'salom! Would I had died instead of you, O Ab'salom, my son, my son!"

The most amazing thing about having a child to me is that sense one gets early on that there is indeed someone on earth one would willingly die for, without a second thought.

Now, the tradition of scripture gives us the following psalm supposedly from David's hand and written in reaction to this event –

1: Out of the depths I cry to thee, O LORD!

2: Lord, hear my voice! Let thy ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications!

3: If thou, O LORD, shouldst mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand?

4: But there is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared.

5: I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in God's word I hope;

6: my soul waits for the LORD more than watchmen for the morning, more than watchmen for the morning.

7: O Israel, hope in the LORD! For with the LORD there is steadfast love, and with God is plenteous redemption.

8: And God will redeem Israel from all his iniquities.

David cried out to God, and because he owned his grief, he was able to move, in time, to a more ordered understanding of God's steadfast love. But first, like many a parent, he examined his own shortcomings in light of his son's complicated choices.

As we all know, David was not a perfect person, but he was sure that God did not hold his past shortcomings and sins against him. He trusted that no one was disqualified from being responded to with divine love, including himself. "If you, O Lord, should mark our iniquities, who could stand?" None of us, for sure.

But there is forgiveness, with God there is comfort, even for broken people like ourselves. So David moves from an incoherent plea to a statement of confidence in the mercies of God and then into a place where he can begin to hope again. "I wait for the Lord, my soul waits ... More than a watchman for the morning, my soul waits for the Lord."

Allow me to back up and look a moment at a single phrase from the Psalm – "If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be [feared]"

"There is forgiveness with you, so that you may be [feared]," not the other way around.

Fear is NOT there to drive us to God's throne for forgiveness. No, the Psalmist says that forgiveness is a foregone conclusion. God knows how weak we are; how prone we are to poor judgment whether we are kings or hang drywall for a living, it makes no difference.

God's forgiveness is the place we begin.

Too often fear, especially fear of God, is wielded from pulpits like this one (and elsewhere) as a weapon. Here's what I mean – Listen to this personal account written by D.S Barnett.

My mother always assured me that unspeakable punishments were bound to befall any child as naughty as I was. "If I were you," she'd say, "I'd be afraid to go to sleep at night, for fear God would strike me dead." She would speak these words softly, regretfully, as though saddened by her errant daughter's fate. I thought myself unloved and unlovable – not only by my own mother, but by God. In addition to threatening me with thoughts of eternal damnation.

Mother also gave me a fear of strangers, germs, disease, and food poisoning. A precocious and imaginative child, I added to the list some bizarre fears of my own: rare ailments learned from medical dictionaries; falling into the fifth dimension; spontaneous human combustion. When I was suspended from my private girls' school at the age of fifteen for a harmless prank, the headmistress referred to my behavior as "damnable." This was no big news to my mother or me. What was news was that I had the highest IQ and the lowest grades in the entire student body. I took pride in the fact that, although I was a dysfunctional underachiever, at least I wasn't stupid.

The most devastating words my mother ever spoke to me came when I asked her if she loved me. (I had just been escorted home by the police after one of my many attempts to run away, so it was bad timing on my part.) She answered, "How could anyone ever love you?" It took me almost fifty years to heal the damage from all her ugly remarks.

Recently, discussing eating disorders with my dietician, I related a childhood ritual of mine, intending it to be an amusing anecdote to illustrate how far back my eating problems went. I even laughed as I spoke, poking gentle fun at myself. It was only when I noticed that my dietician was watching me with sympathy, rather than amusement, that I became aware of the tears on my own cheeks. This is what I told her: From the age of five or six until I was well into my teens, whenever I had trouble sleeping, I would slip out from under my covers and steal into the kitchen for a bit of bread or cheese, which I would carry back to bed with me. There, I'd pretend my hands belonged to someone else, a comforting, reassuring being without a name – an angel, perhaps. The right hand would feed me little bites of cheese or bread as the left hand stroked my cheeks and hair. My eyes closed, I would whisper softly to myself, "There, there. Go to sleep. You're safe now. Everything will be all right. I love you."

We do what we can, don't we? Sad as that story is, it wrecks of the resilience of youth. Compare the loneliness of that with the Psalm of David again –

I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I hope;

my soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning, more than the watchman [who waits so expectantly so desperately] for the morning.

Who knows what God has in mind for us? No one. But what is important is knowing where you can begin -- by looking backward with compassion on our past in order to move forward – David knew this and so should we.

Hear this now, from the end of William Sloan Coffin's eulogy for his beloved son ...

When parents die, as my mother did last month, they take with them a large portion of the past. But when children die, they take away the future as well. That is what makes the valley of the shadow of death seem so incredibly dark and unending. In a prideful way it would be easier to walk the valley alone, nobly, head high, instead of — as we must — marching as the latest recruit in the world's army of the bereaved.

Still there is much by way of consolation. Because there are no rankling unanswered questions, and because Alex and I simply adored each other, the wound for me is deep, but clean. I know how lucky I am! I also know this day-brightener of a son wouldn't wish to be held close by grief (nor, for that matter, would any but the meanest of our beloved departed) and that, interestingly enough, when I mourn Alex least I see him best.

My father and I were very close. When he died I grieved mightily and that grief happened for me mostly in my dreams, but in time he quit being sick in those dreams. He returned to being the dad I remembered before and I am so grateful for that. And part of the work connected with that grief was forgiving myself for not spending more time with him -- for thinking he'd live longer than 62 years.

I want to close with a poem which embraces that . It's by Pesha Gertler and is called, "The Healing Time" –

Finally on my way to yes
I bump into
all the places
where I said no
to my life
all the untended wounds
the red and purple scars
those hieroglyphs of pain
carved into my skin, my bones,
those coded messages
that send me down
the wrong street
again and again

where I find them
the old wounds
the old misdirections
and I lift them
one by one
close to my heart
and I say holy
holy.

Amen.