

Second Samuel 1:17-27: Lament of David over Jonathan

This week is a time of high patriotism in our nation. We will celebrate deliverance by God from many national trials. There are parades, fireworks, and the honoring of those who serve or have served. But what about national acknowledgment of those times when things did not go so well? What about the dark times, not only today but also in Vietnam or the loss of the twin towers? Even in times of victory, there is the loss of brave men and women who fought and died for those freedoms we celebrate. We are in the middle of two grueling and cruel wars, one in Ukraine and one in Israel. There is terrible tragedy and senseless loss of life. What is the proper patriotic stance, and what are the best responses from communities of faith? David pens an instructive lament after a battle in which his best friend, Jonathan, is killed. That is our text this morning.

The Philistines and Israelites have been locked in endless terrible battles. Saul, the first King of Israel, and his son Jonathan, who is the best friend of King David, are killed. David laments.

Saul and Jonathan had been heroic fighters. The women singers of Israel sang of Saul, "He has killed his thousands, and David his tens of thousands." This comparison ate at Saul's soul. As scripture states, an evil spirit gripped him, and he became paranoid about David. But he was the first King, the first sign that the country was a nation, not just a loose tribal confederacy. His loss was grueling and emotional. The loss had to be particularly stunning to David, for although he did not get along with Saul, his very best friend was Jonathan, Saul's son. In this poem, David expressed the closeness men of arms often feel, writing, "Jonathan, your love to me was wonderful." It was a friendship both indescribable and unique.

There is a description of a previous battle in which Jonathan and his armor bearer stumbled upon an advance party of twenty Philistines, and they killed them all. So David and Jonathan were men of arms who shared great victories, and now the ultimate defeat of death struck home.

David, a talented singer and composer of music, composed a song of great beauty and immense poetry for this occasion. Because Jonathan's primary weapon was the bow, David declared that this song would be taught to and learned by those who joined the archery division of Israel.

It is a darkly beautiful song in its three phases, verses, or steps, all of which begin with "Israel is slain upon the high places. O how the mighty have fallen." The song begins with great emotion and then reduces with each step. It serves the function of letting David work through his emotions with an artistic process, to face grief and then to move on. Notice David wants this taught to future generations. This song not only deals with emotional grief but also with the feeling of shame or being "dissed," i.e., dismissed, disregarded, or disrespected by others. David says, "Tell it not in Gath, proclaim it not on the streets of Ashkelon, lest the daughters of the Philistines be glad, lest the daughters of the uncircumcised rejoice." It is not only the loss in battle but also how the enemies will rejoice that terribly hurts David and the Israelites. It reflects the code of honor all military personnel share even today.

David turns his anger towards the place where this terrible and tragic battle took place, pronouncing a curse, "O mountains of Gilboa, may you have neither dew nor offerings of grain, for there the shield of the mighty was defiled." Notice also that he goes from

the general to the particular, from the national to the personal, when he says, “O Jonathan, how wonderful was your love to me.”

After this song was written, David became King of his own tribe of Judah and eventually as king of all Israel, and he ruled successfully. In the end, the armies of King David prevailed against the Philistines, and David’s son, Solomon, inherited a superpower. But at this time and in this place, there was great mourning.

I think that as a nation, we need to do that concerning our conflict about conflict. We need also to take up a lament. We need to work through our national rage, disappointment, and pain and then, like David, we need to bring it from the general to the specific, from the national to the personal.

All of us have different feelings about current wars. Surely, as this song states, many have been slain upon the high places. In Hebrew, “high places” has a double meaning; it can mean the mountains or a cultic platform in which offerings are made to God for either sin or for cultic celebration. There is the double meaning for war; it is a place of honor and a moment of dread.

We need to work through that. We need to remember those who lost their lives, as David remembered Jonathan. We need to teach our children to deal with the tough worldwide issues represented by the subtext of war: issues of trade, economics, and international relations. These issues are far more complex than those that David dealt with.

The Christian faith is the most joyous of any faith, ending with resurrection and the glorious and triumphant return of Christ. But we acknowledge through our worship, through our work, and

through the words of our songs that before Resurrection Sunday, there was the bloody Good Friday in which our Lord died, and his friends and followers were scattered. Our Lord knows, and we know, what it is like to walk through the valley of the shadow of death. All of us do. But we need to remember that at dawn comes life. I have conducted many memorials of servicemen and women, and I always say, “In the sure and certain hope of the resurrection, we commit our sister or brother to you.” All of us are sisters and brothers in life and in death, and all of us can look forward to that glorious morning when there will be no more war and no more death.