

“I’m Afraid I Have Some Bad News”

Neil Engle
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Text: II Samuel 1:1-4; 14-27

First Christian Church
115 Courthouse Plaza
Manhattan, Kansas 66502

Some of you know that for the past year or so, I’ve served as one of the volunteer chaplains with the Riley County Police Department. Two other local clergy and I rotate the responsibilities. We carry a pager for a month at a time, and are encouraged to do ride-alongs to get to know the officers. We are called into service when the presence of a chaplain might be helpful to either the officer or the public. Most of our calls involve death notifications. We accompany an officer when he or she has the task of informing an individual that a family member has died. Two weeks ago I went with an officer to notify a young man, whom the hospital had been unable to contact, that his father had died of a heart attack.

A few months ago, I accompanied an officer who had the unpleasant task of telling a young woman that her brother had been shot and killed. When I lived in McPherson and was a chaplain there, my first death notification call was to an elderly couple whose grandson had been struck and killed by a train. Sometimes the officer delivers the news; sometimes the chaplain does. But regardless of whose mouth the words come from, it is never easy and always painful to deliver that kind of news. Of course, when a police officer and a chaplain knock on your door at 3:00 a.m., you know it’s not good.

I often encourage the person to sit down and then say, “I’m afraid I have some bad news.” People react as you would imagine – shock, disbelief, anger, fainting, literally collapsing when they hear tragic or shocking news. Fortunately, I’ve never had anyone react to the news of the death of a loved one the way David reacted to the report about the death of Saul and his son Jonathan. David had the messenger killed.

We’re returning to focus on David this week. Last week we talked about David and Goliath, and in a few weeks we’ll talk about David and Bathsheba – not one of David’s finer moments. But today we’re looking at David’s reaction to this death notification.

If you recall much about the life of King Saul and his relationship with David, it’s kind of a surprise that David would have such a strong sorrowful reaction. You see, after David’s defeat of Goliath, Saul made David an army commander, and his heroic deeds quickly came to be celebrated, even above Saul’s. Saul became jealous of David and soon began to suspect that the young hero was the man that the priest and judge Samuel threatened would overthrow him. Saul’s love and admiration for David alternated with blinding fear, jealousy of David’s success, and hatred.

Saul tried to murder David with the throw of a spear, but then promoted him to a higher command. In the midst of all this, David developed a deep friendship with Saul’s son, Jonathan.

As one scholar observes:

The king began systematic attempts to capture and execute David, and he thereby alienated . . . Jonathan . . . and found his efforts blocked even by divine power. His fear and hatred led him into atrocities such as the execution of the priests of the sanctuary at Nob, whom he suspected of supporting David. After David formed a private army in the hills of Judah, Saul squandered much of his strength by relentlessly pursuing his ever elusive foe. Though David protested his loyalty and even spared Saul’s life when he could have taken it, Saul could never escape the echo of Samuel’s dire predictions, especially after Samuel died and David joined forces with the Philistines.

In a battle against the Philistines – one in which David did not participate – Jonathan is killed and Saul is mortally wounded. The scripture says that in order to avoid capture, Saul fell on his own sword and died.

It’s worth noting that the details of Saul’s death differ a bit. At the end of I Samuel we have the description about Saul falling on his own sword after his armor bearer refused to kill him. Then in today’s passage, we have another man saying that he killed Saul. No doubt this man was in the battle, indeed he has Saul’s crown and armband to prove it. But why would he claim to have killed Saul? Maybe he’s trying to gain favor in David’s eyes by pretending to be responsible for Saul’s death.

Even though Saul and David had been at odds, the news of Saul's death devastates David. His reaction is two-fold. His immediate response is one of anger, thus he has the messenger – the confessed killer – put to death on the spot. His second response is one of mourning for Saul, Jonathan, and the defeated Israelites.

This dirge – or lamentation – is one of the most eloquent and timeless expressions of grief in world literature. It is introduced with the equivalent of a modern footnote – “It is written in the Book of Jashar.” The book of Jashar was probably an ancient collection of songs and poems.

I think it's interesting that this lamentation contains no specifically religious expressions at all. There is no prayer or reference to God. This is consistent with the fact that the funeral in ancient Israel was not a religious occasion; in fact, contact with a corpse could render one ritually unclean. Through most of its religious history, ancient Israel considered death the end, a boundary that removed one even from the presence of God.

Despite its lack of religious orientation, David's lamentation is instructive for us in a couple of ways. First, I believe it addresses our general discomfort with grief itself. For many, if not most of us, the rough reality of losing someone – or seeing someone else suffer such a loss – is just too much for us to address honestly and fully.

As Johann Arnold writes in *Be Not Afraid*:

It demands of us vulnerability – the admission of weakness, dependence and the fear that we've come to the end of our rope – and because of this we try to brush it off, or skirt it by means of pat phrases. And when that doesn't work, we treat it like a speed bump: slowing down because we have to, but then hurrying on as quickly as possible. Sometimes we do this for ourselves, in the hope that if we can pick ourselves up again and “move on,” we can limit our pain. Sometimes, worried what others will think about us if we don't pull ourselves together soon, we mask our pain by bottling it up silently. Common as it is to try to deal with grief in this way, it does not work. Hide it, talk around it, postpone it, pretend it isn't there – in the long run, grief will never go away until it is met head on and allowed to run its course.

The only way to get around grief is to go through it. As someone has said about grief: “You have to feel it, to heal it.”

We can't be drive-by grievers. We must take what time we need to acknowledge and deal with and come to terms with and make a new normal in light of our loss – whether that loss is the death of a loved one, the passing of a fond pet, the dissolution of a marriage, the end of a career, or the demise of a life-long dream.

David's dirge contains many elements that are still necessary during the grief that accompanies the death of someone close to us, and that includes expressions of the pain of loss – verbal as well as physical – words and tears. It is also helpful to have expressions of anger; in this case, that anger is directed both at the Philistines and even at the mountain where Saul and Jonathan died.

Sometimes our anger is directed toward God. I think God is big enough to handle our anger. It's also helpful to remember and celebrate what life was like with that person around – to celebrate their contributions and the special relationship we had with the deceased. That's what David does in remembering Saul and Jonathan.

Beyond reminding us to take time to grieve, I believe David's eulogy offers us another lesson. Saul's treatment of David gave David every reason to speak ill of Saul. David could have been like Moms Mabley – you remember her – the comedienne who once said, “I know you're not supposed to say anything about the dead unless it's good. My husband's dead. Good!” But David chose to take the high road. David was able to set aside personal ambitions and animosities and describe Saul and Jonathan as beloved and lovely. He called upon the daughters of Israel to weep over Saul who clothed them with crimson and luxury.

Do we have the grace to speak well of those with whom we disagree? Can we appreciate the good qualities and contributions to the common good of even our enemies? And what about our friends? David was able to celebrate the bond between father and son without demanding of Jonathan to choose one loyalty either to David, his best friend, or Saul his father and David's worst enemy. Do our friendships place inordinate demands on others? Are we willing to honor and respect appropriate boundaries placed on our relationships by the demands of other legitimate realities in which our friends find themselves?

David's lament, I believe, exemplifies a magnitude of heart and spirit capable of transcending narrow self-interests or partisan attitudes. It speaks of the nature of God-inspired love, love of friend as well as of enemy.

Speaking of love, in *Be Not Afraid*, Arnold writes:

Love is a tangible reality. Sometimes it is born of passion or devotion; sometimes it is a hard-won fruit, requiring work and sacrifice. Its source is unimportant. But unless we live for love, we will not be able to meet death confidently when it comes. I say this because I am certain that when our last breath is drawn and our soul meets God, we will not be asked how much we have accomplished. We will be asked whether we have loved enough. To quote John of the Cross, "In the evening of life you shall be judged on love." . . .

As my great-aunt Else lay dying of tuberculosis, a friend asked her if she had one last wish. She replied, "Only to love more." If we live our lives in love, we will know peace at the hour of death. And we will not be afraid.