

Practicing Our Faith: Dying Well

A sermon preached by Emily Hull McGee on August 27, 2017

on Psalms 88, 139:1-18, and 46

at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC

Lament

The lamentation was unmistakable, landing in the ears of God and his friends with all the force of a terrible storm: "The upshot," he says, "is that I had approached this stage of my life with the best agenda I could conceive, the best resources I could assemble, and the best relationships I could form to help me accomplish it. Then ALS struck and said, I'm going to take it *all* away from you! Living with that overwhelming sense of loss is about as dark as it ever gets this side of hell. How could God possibly shed any light in that total eclipse of my hopes and dreams?"¹

Lament in the face of death is an intimate portrait of the contours of one's life. For my Granddaddy Bill who had a clearly-articulated agenda even approaching death, his groanings were those of a scholar richly resourced with books, office space, assistance, years of retirement with which to mine the depths of his lifelong interests, and stories left to write and tell. The sighs too deep for words arose from a wellspring of relationships — friends, family, spouse — from which he never lacked a quenching drink and with whom he loved to toast.

ALS had suddenly made his life terminal and his laments pierced the air like stormy waves crashing upon the shore, with all the sorrow of the Psalmist. "You have put me in the depths of the Pit, in the regions dark and deep. Your wrath lies heavy upon me, and you overwhelm me with all your waves." The darkness for him was, quite literally, suffocating.

¹ Excerpted from William E. Hull's "Finding God in the Darkness," the final sermon he preached at Mountain Brook Baptist Church, Birmingham, AL. An expanded version of this sermon can be found at the link: <http://pastarticles.christianethicstoday.com/CETArt/index.cfm?fuseaction=Articles.main&ArtID=1056>

I suppose it's no mistake that lamentations, particularly those of death and dying, bear the unmistakable signs of nature. "Tears that run down like a river day and night," the Book of Lamentations calls them. "Your wrath has swept over me; your dread assaults destroy me. They surround me like a flood all day long; from all sides they close in on me." Because when death only takes up sanitized residence for so many in hospital rooms and funeral homes, it should be no surprise that the earthiest images are the ones that feel most guttural and human in the hours of our need.

But even when the Psalmist cries out, "O Lord, why do you cast me off? Why do you hide your face from me?," the cries seem to go unanswered. Lament, then, is heightened from the sense of abandonment from the One who grants life in the first place.² Even Jesus, the "man of sorrows" knew that absence and was "acquainted with [that] grief." For from the cross rang out a cry like a thunderclap: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"³

You and I know those laments; we've voiced them, we've cried them out, we've felt them for the dead and those they've left behind. We grieve because we value human life so fully and love so deeply. Augustine once said that our mourning tears, "streamed down, and I let them flow as freely as they would, making of them a pillow for my heart. On them it rested."⁴ Perhaps the tears sound like the anguished cries of a God who weeps and suffers with us. For "surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night."

² Walter Brueggemann and William H. Bellinger, Jr., *Psalms*, New Cambridge Bible Commentary, p379.

³ Scriptural phrases in this section draw from Lamentations, Psalms, Isaiah, & Romans.

⁴ Augustine, *Confessions* IX, 12.

Thanksgiving

Of all things, it was the memory of an old green Bendix washing machine that helped him through the valley of the shadow of death. Long-beloved pastor John Claypool began walking that valley when his young daughter Laura Lue was diagnosed with what proved to be terminal leukemia at age eight. Her suffering had been intense, and his grief upon the end of her life, shattering. As he groped through the darkness, searching for a way out beyond the "road of unquestioning resignation" — where you don't question God or try to understand, but simply accept silently and surrender — or the "road of total intellectual understanding" — where you explain everything away and tie up all loose ends with answers — he remembered that Bendix.

Those memories were of the war years, you see, when gas was rationed and laundry was several miles away. So when one of his father's coworkers was drafted and his wife went with him, John's father suggested that they store their furniture in the Claypool basement for safekeeping. It was then that the departing wife suggested they use their washing machine while they'd be gone. "Use it," she said, "better to be up and running than sitting and rusting."

Well as the household laundry washer at the tender age of eleven, John nurtured quite a love for the Bendix washing machine and its presence in their home during those four years. Two days a week, he'd come home from school, gather up all the dirty laundry, and delighted in the soap bubble configurations, the rubber rollers, and the plunger that made it all happen. But when the young friends returned home and the Bendix left the Claypool basement one day without his knowledge, John was terribly upset when it left, staring with futile anger at the gaping hole it left in their basement. "It seems I had forgotten how the machine came to be in our home in the first place," he said. When he confided these feelings of anger in his mama ("we've been robbed! Someone's stolen our washing machine!"), she wisely turned to him and said: "now wait a minute, son. You must remember, that machine never belonged to us in the first place. That we ever got to use it at all was a gift. Remember, John, you treat gifts

differently from the way you treat possessions. When something belongs to you and it is taken away, you have a right to be angry. But when something is a gift and it is taken from you, you use that occasion to give thanks that it was ever given at all."

In his first sermon back in the pulpit after Laura Lue died, John told that story and said this: "Here, in a nutshell, is what it means to understand something as a gift and to handle it with gratitude, a perspective biblical religion puts around all of life. And I am here to testify that this is the only way down from the Mountain of Loss. I do not mean to say that such a perspective makes things easy, for it does not. But at least it makes things bearable when I remember that Laura Lue was a gift, pure and simple, something I neither earned nor deserved nor had a right to. And when I remember that the appropriate response to a gift, even when it is taken away, is gratitude, then I am better able to try and thank God that I was ever given her in the first place."⁵

What if we thought of life — ours or our beloved's — not as a possession to which we are entitled, but rather a gift by which we are utterly blessed?⁶

Hope

"I am chagrined to confess that to this critical hour I bring no ready word," he said. "For all of my training in sacred rhetoric I possess no semantic sleight of hand by which to bend our question marks into exclamation points before this hour is over... Alas, I am filled not with sound but with silence as I stand mute before the mystery of the event which we here celebrate with such sorrow."⁷

Heartbroken for the staggering loss his dearest friend John was facing, my Granddaddy Bill stood in front of his beloved community in the pulpit of Crescent

⁵ Story from John Claypool's sermon "Life Is Gift," preached at Crescent Hill Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky, and reprinted in his books, *Tracks of a Fellow Struggler: How to Handle Grief*, p81-82 and *Mending the Heart*, p63-66.

⁶ Claypool, *Mending the Heart*, p63.

⁷ William E. Hull, "The Sound of Silence: In Memoriam, Laura Lue," p3.

Hill Baptist Church on that cold January day in 1970 to memorialize sweet Laura Lue. But we know as he did, that often in grief words fail us. When the earthquake of shock simmers down, when the thunder of anger has passed, when the hurricane winds and rains of lament subside, when the fire of mourning cools, all that remains as the Lord passes by is the sound of sheer silence. "So be still and know that I am God," the Psalmist says.

Pico Iyer once said, "silence is the tribute we pay to holiness; we slip off words when we enter a sacred space, just as we slip off shoes."⁸ Our silence is even filled by the Spirit, who in the words of Paul, "helps us in our weakness... [and] intercedes with sighs too deep for words." Thus if silence is more than the absence of noise, if it is as Iyer says "a sacred space of holiness," then "is that kind of spiritual stillness not a denial of hope but precisely an affirmation of its immense potential?"⁹ Earlier in Romans, Paul reminds us that "hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen?" Similarly, what if "hope that is heard is not hope. For who hopes for what is heard?" Instead of denying hope, might the stillness be "precisely an affirmation of its true possibility?"¹⁰ Might the sound of silence be a portal that opens us up to the indescribable life beyond what we know and hear? Might we find refuge in the still, small voice of God, refuge where hope might be born anew?

Henri Nouwen once said: "If the God who revealed life to us, and whose only desire is to bring us to life, loved us so much that he wanted to experience with us the total absurdity of death, then — yes, then there must be hope; then there must be something more than death; then there must be a promise that is not fulfilled in our short existence in this world; then leaving behind the ones you love, the flowers and the trees, the mountains and the oceans, the beauty of art

⁸ Pico Iyer, "The Eloquent Sounds of Silence," *Time*, January 25, 1993, 74.

⁹ William E. Hull, *Harbingers of Hope*, 258.

¹⁰ "The Sound of Silence," p7.

and music, and all the exuberant gifts of life cannot be just the destruction and cruel end of all things; then indeed we have to wait for the third day."¹¹

Nearly 44 years after he struggled for words to remember Laura Lue, ALS began to silence again my Granddaddy Bill's words. In the stillness Granddaddy Bill knew that "Jesus was right: tragedy is but the raw material of hope, the dark backdrop against which it is possible to glimpse the glory of God."¹² But "even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you." Resurrection hope on the third day is real! And within that hope, words began to flow, words that formed his penultimate book before his passing, entitled *The Quest for a Good Death*. In it, he addresses the modern challenges of dying well: interpreting diagnoses and developing a medical plan, clarifying wills and advanced directives, seeking care and equipment to make living easier. But like the air in which he breathed even as each breath became harder was the promise of hope in dying, "hope," he said, that was a "life-giving oxygen to a human spirit starved for meaning."¹³

For Bill and John and Laura Lue — for you, and me, and you — through wind and rain, thunder and lightening, earthquakes and fire, and in the sound of sheer silence, we all know and trust that the laments of this life are not the final word. The thanksgivings of our grief will not be our final song. Because our hope is this: "when we all get to heaven, what a day of rejoicing that will be! When we all see Jesus, we'll sing and shout the victory!" Amen!

¹¹ Henri Nouwen, *A Letter of Consolation*, p87.

¹² As quoted on the bulletin of the Celebration of the Life of William E. Hull, http://www.mbbc.org/download_file/view/587.

¹³ William E. Hull, *The Quest for a Good Death*, p65.