

The Language of Lament (2 Sam. 18.5-9, 15, 31-35)
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This morning's proclamation contains three lament stories. Each of the stories is a story of grief, each of the stories is a story of protest, and each of the stories is an exceedingly difficult story to tell and to hear. I want to begin, before I tell these stories, by noting that lamentation is a part of our religious tradition. To cry out and to name our suffering can and should be elements of our religious practice. There is a time for us to tell bitter stories. And there is a reason to tell them, too. The reason that I have chosen to tell lament stories today is that, if we are open to their hard words of pain and suffering, they may help us develop a deeper sense of humanity and more compassionate ways of thinking and being. With this in mind we can begin.

Ghazi Samra told a reporter from *The New York Times* that last month he "became a different person." Until the beginning of the recent war between Israel and Hezbollah guerrillas in Lebanon, Ghazi had been a fisherman who earned a relatively simply living and was able to provide for his family. His life hadn't been all that remarkable, but it contained the simple sweetnesses of marriage and parenthood, hard work with just enough reward for him. It didn't seem like too much to ask for, this life of a Lebanese fisherman and his family. It was probably the only life Ghazi had ever really known, and at fifty years old he had settled into it rather well. The future might have played out beautifully in his imagination. He would continue to fish and teach the younger men, he would return home every evening to sit at the table with his wife and eat fresh fruit from the bowl, he would cradle the grandchildren in his arms and watch them grow up there by

the sea, just as he had. But by the time Ghazi spoke with the newspaper reporter, all of those imaginings had been taken away and replaced with a stunning sense of grief and the complete disorientation that goes along with it.

Last month, after the war began, Ghazi hurriedly led his wife, four children, and one grandchild to an emergency shelter in the basement of a nearby building. The building they lived in didn't have a basement, and he feared for his family's safety as bombs and rockets began to fall on their city. Ghazi thought that he was doing the right thing when he left them in the shelter and went to sit with some other men outside the building. But not long after his family took refuge in the basement, rockets struck the building's foundation and it collapsed. When the rubble was cleared, Ghazi found that wife, his young daughter, and his granddaughter had been killed. His three remaining living daughters, each of them very badly injured, were taken to the hospital.

The different person that Ghazi has become in the last month is a man sunk into the overwhelming anguish of his losses. He stumbles through the city without knowing quite what to do. "He [cannot] focus on anything. He [has] trouble remembering things. His vision [seems] to blur." And he moves through each new and terrible day like a ghost, the pain increasing as the shock slowly subsides. The reporter who spoke with Ghazi noted that the path he is on, the path of the survivor is, "a major consequence of war that often goes unnoticed, after the flash of bombs and the headlines that chronicle them fade away." And the beginning of lament is the recognition of the humanity beneath the headlines, the understanding that for every life that is taken by war, a lifelong process of grieving is just beginning for innumerable others. This human cost is not something that

we like to think about. But to lament is to believe that the human cost must be thought about, must be told, must be grieved if we are to hold on to our humanity at all.

A second story: Not long after the latest war in Iraq began, a caretaker at a mosque laid out the body of a fourteen-year-old boy named Arkan Daif. The caretaker slowly washed the boy with cotton dipped in water, gently patted at the recently dried blood, carefully wiped the dust from the boy's olive skin. Around him stood various members of Arkan's family with tears on their faces, breathing as well as they could, watching the ritual cleansing take place in disbelief. His father said of Arkan that he was "like a flower."

Only three hours earlier Arkan had been alive. When everything exploded he was outside with his cousins, Sabah and Jalal, digging a trench that they hoped to deepen into a bomb shelter. A number of other boys from the village were there, too, all of them working frantically now that the war had come. But before they could finish there was a flash of light and a concussion followed by the rain of people and buildings torn apart. After that came voices yelling and a rush of men who quickly attended to the boys who had been wounded but managed to survive. Arkan was not one of them. When his family found him, they knelt where he lay and wept for their son.

People in the village did not know what caused the explosion. Some said that a bomb had been dropped from a plane. Others were sure that antiaircraft fire had fallen back onto them and caused the destruction. In either case, the larger causal understanding was clear. It was the war that had taken the lives of the boys. It was the war that had claimed the sons of the village. It was the war that had brought this grief into their homes. Many

of the people in the village began to angrily denounce the war itself, blaming both of the governments who had made it, protesting the absurdity of the killing of innocent boys. Later most everyone would go to prayer, but the prayers were informed by a sense of grievance that a great injustice that had been done. Prayers became laments as they refused passive acceptance and demanded that their suffering be heard. Arkan's mother herself put such prayer into unforgettable words.

After his body had been prepared at the mosque, Arkan was placed in a coffin and carried home where his friends and relatives could grieve together. The men in the family finally gave themselves over to emotion, hugging each other and sobbing. The women in black *abayas* wailed and waved their hands. Through her tears Arkan's mother protested. "My son! My son!" she cried, "Where are you now?" "My son! My son! Where are you?" It is the question that has hung over all wars.

One of the most difficult stories in biblical literature ends on a very similar note. It is the third of our lament stories, the lectionary reading that we heard this morning, recorded in the Hebrew Bible and passed down to us. It tells of a war between David and a rebel army that is led by his own son, Absalom. As the story goes, we are quickly invited into the tension that the war's opposing forces are actually members of the same family. In fact, when David sends his commanders into battle he says to them quite clearly, "Deal gently with the young man Absalom for my sake." So as the violence of battle begins there is at least some knowledge of what is at stake. But, as always, once the swords are drawn reverence for life falls by the wayside. And in the war that ensues, David's son is struck down, killed by the soldiers sent by his father.

Now there is a political context to the particular war between David and Absalom, just as there is a political context to every war. But perhaps what is most haunting in the biblical story is how easily the political context fades away in light of a larger context, how unimportant the political gains become in light of the unspeakable losses. It is King David himself, with his lament, who begins to express a deeper, more profound truth about war. This truth transcends the political and goes straight to the personal. And when we hear it, we can hear that it has echoed through the centuries, all the way to the present day with its ongoing wars and tremulous ceasefires.

After Absalom is killed, a messenger reaches David to deliver news of his army's victory. The king, however, pacing in his chamber, wants to know only one thing. "Is all well with the young man Absalom?" And here we might just stop the story for a moment. *The rockets have struck a building in Lebanon and the fisherman, Ghazi's, heart stops. The explosion has happened in an Iraqi village and Arkan's parents scramble outside looking for him. The messenger approaches the king and David runs to him, seizing him by the shoulders.* And for a moment all of the stories are one story, every character the same, there are no sides, there are no politics, there is nothing, nothing, just the question. "Tell me. What of the young man Absalom? What of my child? What news do you bring of him?" And then there is the news. The news that always comes. He is killed...in the war.

According to the Hebrew Bible, when David hears that Absalom is dead, he goes up to the roof to weep. He cries as he goes, issuing perhaps the most anguished plea to be found in our sacred stories. "O, my son!" he sobs. "Absalom my son, my son Absalom! Would that I had died instead of you! O Absalom, my son, my son." And he just

wanders off, stumbling around on the rooftop, muttering only the name, over and over, only the relationship, again and again, realizing far too late the deeper human context of the war. “My son, my son,” he intones, the stream of tears on his face unending, and there on the roof of his palace there is no consolation. For what has been lost cannot be regained.

I am mindful that to tell stories like these on a Sunday morning is a very risky thing to do. And I have offered them believing that not to tell stories like these is even riskier. For a part of healthy religious practice, albeit a very difficult part, is to tell stories that may not have happy endings. Sometimes the endings are gut-wrenching, they tear our hearts out, and so we think that perhaps we shouldn't tell such stories, fearing that we'll simply make each other feel bad, bring ourselves down with the weight of the world. But what these stories hold the possibility of doing is changing the context from the political back to the human. For behind every photograph in *The New York Times* there lies the story of a real human being, beneath every political map in our atlas there is hidden a story of human longing and loss, and beyond the narrow affiliations of nation and sect there can be found a common humanity that all of us share. And when our eyes well up with tears – for the losses of a Lebanese fisherman, an Israeli soldier, an Iraqi family, a teashop owner in Gaza, an American relief worker, an Afghan farmer – when our eyes well up with tears we can feel that common humanity. We can feel it in our lament. And this may be the beginning of true compassion, acknowledging that the other is us, sharing a concern for all of our sisters and brothers who suffer.

I'm not going to end this proclamation poetically, although that is my usual preference. I like to end on an upswing with something inspiring that makes us all feel good. But maybe we can't feel good every week...and maybe we shouldn't really expect to while the wars continue. So I'm going to end the proclamation the same way it began, with a rather clumsy disclaimer.

There are times to tell our most difficult stories. There are times to hear of the wars, the daughters and sons they have claimed, and simply to weep. There are times to cry out in protest, to identify with the pain and suffering that are being inflicted, and even to shuffle through the streets in a daze. But we do not do these things in order to get caught in a cycle of despair or cynicism. However paradoxically, we tell our saddest stories and name our laments in order to hold on to our humanity, to connect with a deeper sense of compassion for our sisters and brothers everywhere. And the language of lament articulates both our grief with what is and our continuing longing for what is not yet. It is, I think, the oldest language in the book. It is, I think, the holy yearning for peace. It is, I think, the honest prayer made of tears and questions and heartbrokenness.

So on this day may we find within our lament a deeper sense of compassion. May we pay close attention to what such compassion may be asking of us. And may we pray or meditate or hold in our thoughts those sisters and brothers who are living in the wars we've waged.

Amen.

(I relied upon the article "After Bomb Kills Loved Ones, Life Turns Ghostly in Lebanon" in the Tuesday, August 8, 2006 edition of *The New York Times*, the book *Night Draws Near: Iraq's People in the Shadow of America's War* by Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter Anthony Shadid, and the Revised English translation of the Hebrew Bible.)