

The Problems and the Promises of Waiting

Psalm 130; Romans 8:18-27, 31-39

I stand here before you today to tell you that what you have heard all of your life is true, there is nothing worse than the loss of one's own child. I am well acquainted with death. I have experienced the death of countless numbers of people over the years- some old, some young, some well-known, others less so- and I can tell you that each and every one of them was dearly loved by their families, their churches, and by me, their pastor. I have also experienced the death of most of my family members- grandparents, parents, aunts, uncles, and numerous cousins. I dug the graves of my mother and my father and laid them to rest with my own hands. But in terms of their affects on me, there is not a one of those deaths or burials that can compare to the death of my son, Rob. It feels as though something or someone has reached into my chest and torn my heart into pieces.

As so many of you have said to me, "It is not supposed to be this way. Children are not supposed to die before their parents." But they do. They die and leave big holes in our lives that can never be filled. They die and leave us changed, never again to be the persons we were before. But worse than that, their dying changes the future- not just theirs but ours as well. Their dying leaves us to face a radically altered future, a future with nothing but their memories to guide and console us.

The theologian, Nicholas Wolterstorff, says something very similar about the death of his son. His words give voice to the tragedy of a life lost too soon and the grieving that inevitably follows such a tragedy.

"I give of myself to the formation of this other person, from helplessness to independence...I take it on myself to stay with him so that he has a future, a future in which I can delight...But now he has slipped out my arms. He's gone and that future has been destroyed...He's only in my memory now, not in my life. Nothing new can happen between us. Everything is sealed tight, shut in the past. But I am still here. I have to go on. I have to start over. But this new start is different from the first. Then I wasn't carrying this load, this thing that's over."

As you can imagine, it is hard for me to believe that Rob's life is really over, hard to believe that I and other members of my family have to start over without him. For the first few days after his death, I found myself in denial. It's just a bad dream, I thought to myself. I'll wake up and see him walking into my house, or meet him at the Home Depot, or share a meal with him at some restaurant. But I soon woke up to the realization that it was true, he was dead and I would never see him again. And then I got angry- angry with Rob and angry with myself. I made myself sick playing the coulda, shoulda game, second guessing all we had ever

done or failed to do. Only then, did I begin to grieve in a way that I had never grieved before. And only then, did I begin to question God in a way that I had never questioned God before.

I am supposed to know something about grieving. As a pastoral theologian, I have taken and taught numerous courses on grieving to seminarians and church members. As a pastor, I have grieved with and for many people. Even so, I find myself ill prepared for the kind of grieving that now consumes me and my family. Like the Psalmist, I find myself crying out from the deep, dark, and deathly places of another world, a world that I have been forced to enter against my will. I cry out “Why, God? Why did you let this happen? Why didn’t you do something to help my son?” For years, I have prayed for you to heal his mind and body from the terrible effects of war, drugs, and alcohol. I have prayed for you to help him chase away the demons of his past so that he might find his way in life. I have prayed that you might show him how to use the enormous talents you gave him to some good end. I have prayed for you give him a home and family of his own, things for which I know he longed. But you did not do any of these things, God, a fact that hurts and confuses me.

The poet, Ann Weems, speaks to my hurt and confusion in a heart-wrenching psalm of lament written after the death of her son, Todd.

“O God, I live in the land of the forgotten.

I stretch out my hand to you

and there is nothing.

I cry night and day,

and you do not take pity on me.

I pray to you,

but you turn away.

O God, why won’t you help me?

You show compassion for your enemies

and long for the faithless to return to you,

Yet I have worshiped you

since I was a child,

and have lived in covenant with you,

yet, like a fly,

I am brushed away
from your throne
as though I don't belong
in your presence.
How long will I have to live
outside your holiness?
How long will I have to endure
the unholy hell
of the presence of death?
How long will I have to feel
the ever-fresh wound
of the absence
of him whom I loved?
Undo it, O God!
Give him back!
O God, why did you create a life
that includes death?
Why did you create us
to love one another
and then take from us
the ones we love?

Like Weems and so many others before me, I cannot make sense of what has happened. I cannot bring myself to say that God caused Rob's death but neither can I say that God could not have done something to prevent it. This is what hurts and confuses me so. I grieve the fact that Rob is dead, that he did not have the time to realize his hopes and dreams. I grieve the fact that neither I, nor Sally, nor Jenny, nor Ben, nor Robyn, nor little Grace will ever again see his face or hear his voice. I grieve that none of us will ever again feel his arms around us, or ours around him. I grieve the deep, painful wounds that his death has brought to me and my

family. And like C. S. Lewis, I believe that our wounds, and the wounds of all humanity, are unanswered questions for which God must one day give an account.

I have no satisfactory explanation for Rob's untimely death. I do not know why God did not intervene and save my son. But then again, I do not know why God did not intervene and save his own son who also cried out from the darkness, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" So, like the Psalmist, and like Jesus, I have to wait in the darkness for the answers, hoping that, sooner or later, I will see the light.

Waiting is hard to do. I don't like being kept in the dark. I don't like the questions that hound me in the night. Waiting induces its own kind of suffering. But I am learning that what the scriptures say is true- suffering produces endurance, and endurance leads to a hope that doesn't disappoint us.

In a sermon preached some 20 years after the death of his daughter, Laura Lue, the late John Claypool noted that there are times when the only thing God offers us "is the power to endure what cannot be changed, to allow the change to take place within us rather than in the outward circumstance we face." For Claypool, and for me, the power to endure the death of one's child and not fall into a deep and debilitating despair is perhaps one of the most relevant and miraculous things God can do for us. But how, you might ask, does this power manifest itself?

For me, the power to endure comes with knowing that I am not alone in my suffering, that even in the darkest valley with the shadow of death all around me, God is with me.

In *A Letter of Consolation*, Henri Nouwen speaks to both the problems and the promises of waiting and, in doing so, he helps me to understand that death and darkness will not hem me in forever.

"If the God who loved us so much that he wanted to experience with us the total absurdity of death, then- yes, 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 we love...cannot be just the destruction and cruel end of things; then indeed I have to wait for the third day."

This, of course, is what the Apostle Paul is getting at when he says that our present sufferings are not worth comparing to the future glory that will be revealed to us. He knows that waiting is hard for us, that it makes us groan inwardly. But he also affirms that while we groan and wait for the redemption of our bodies, the Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness and intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. The Spirit knows what we need. The Spirit also knows what God wills for us and all of creation. And the Spirit works to bring those things into

harmony, doing for us what we cannot do for ourselves. Just so, we can endure this time of waiting because, as God has shown us in the work of both Jesus and the Holy Spirit, we know that nothing, not even death, can separate us from the love of God.

But the power to endure this dark and deathly time of waiting has manifested itself to me in another way that is every bit as remarkable as the first. It has come to me through other people- friends and family members, preachers and poets, known and unknown members of the faith community. It has come to me through people like you, people who dare to enter into my grief, people who dare to stand with me in my dark time of waiting. While I am weak, you are strong. While I am blind, you see. While my faith falters, you stand firm in yours. While I am lost, you know the way home. And so I give thanks to God for many ways in which you ministered to me and my family.

Over these past few weeks, I have learned, as if for the first time, that nothing, not even death can separate me from the love of God. I have learned that, with your help and God's, I can now wait with a new confidence that there will come a time when "God will wipe away every tear from our eyes, a time when death will be no more; a time when mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things will have passed away...and the glory of God will be our light." And I can wait with the confidence that such a time has already come for Rob; that for him a new morning has dawned, flooding his darkness with the glorious light of our loving God. Amen.

A sermon preached on

January 30, 2011 by

Dr. Robert R. Laha, Jr. at

The Old Presbyterian Meeting House

Alexandria, Virginia

after the death of his son, Rob.

In memoriam:

Robert R. Laha III

February 1, 1979- December 19, 2010

