

Palisades Presbyterian Church
Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
August 13, 2006

Reflection:

“I would certainly like to praise music with all my heart as the excellent gift of God which it is and to commend it to everyone...”
Martin Luther from the *Preface* to Georg Rhau’s *Symphoniae iuncundae* (Wittenberg, 1538)

Readings: 2 Samuel 16: 5-9, 15, 31-33
John 6: 35, 41-51

Hymns:	Hymn #386	O For a World
	Hymn #319	Spirit
	Hymn #540	God Be With You Till We Meet Again

I Just Went On Praying
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“I never doubted God’s existence – I had questions about God’s absence.” So began Elie Weisel in a recent interview with Krista Tippett on www.speakingoffaith.org.

Most of us will know Weisel as the author of Night, his 1958 book on his imprisonment at concentration camps of Auschwitz and Buchenwald.

Author, playwright, Nobel laureate, I have heard him interviewed before, and the question that invariably is asked is how could he go on believing in God after what he had been through, what he had seen, the family and friends he had lost in those dark days seared into his memory.

This interview was no different, in that regard, although he talked about some things that I had either forgotten or not heard him say. In this conversation, he referred to the “tragedy of the believer,” emphasizing that the tragedy of the believer is much greater than that of the non-believer, when terrible things happen.

I thought a bit about that as I flew home from Seattle late Friday into early Saturday morning. I had downloaded the interview onto my iPod, and as I listened to it in the strange quiet of a cabin at 30,000 feet – I thought how true this was.

After a few moments, I began to think about and feel compassion for David, especially in this morning’s readings. I looked at the text again and thought about how his life was in so many ways as tragic as any mythic hero, who had found himself anointed by God and sometimes forgot that he was not God or God’s equal...generally a sure formula for drama and tragedy.

David’s legacy is complicated and not without his critics, but his moments of despair transcend any privilege of rank or birth: “Absalom, my son, my son.”

You can hear the unspoken that follows: “How had it come to this, God? How could you have let this happen? What have I done that such a thing would befall my son?”

Not only did David lose his son on that day – and nearly lost his kingdom as a result of his behavior, but he also lost something in the relationship he had had with God.

Somehow, surely, he did see these events as unfolding punishment for his actions and his own sins. Who has not felt the pang of guilt at the loss of someone close to them: thinking what they could have said; what they wished they had not said; how they wished they had taken the time...

All normal painful responses to loss. And, who has not questioned God at such moments? I know that I have.

So, from my own losses and struggles with God, I knew what Weisel said was true: Yes, the tragedy of the situation can be increased because we believe, that somewhere in our belief is an understanding or a hopefulness that such things will not befall us. God wouldn't do this to us or someone we love -- And when "stuff" does happen it is easy to feel the advancing thunder of despair.

And, despair is a pivotal part of the story of David and the death of Absalom. After his son was killed, a son who would have killed the father for his the throne had he had the opportunity, David's grief was seen by his army that had just saved his kingdom as an indication they had done something terribly wrong. Here were his soldiers, looking to the king for praise and acclaim at their returning victoriously from battle, and all they see is David mourning the son who had betrayed him. The son his army had killed to protect their king.

Sort of like, "What's up here?!"

Later in the readings, Joab – the faithful general that David ordered to send Uriah to the front so that he might die and cover up David's affair with Bathsheba – Joab comes to the king in his isolation and grief and says:

"You have today covered with shame the faces of your servants, who have this day saved your life, and the lives of your sons, and your daughters, and the lives of your wives and your concubines, because you love those who hate you and hate those who love you. For you have made it clear today that commanders and servants are nothing to you; for today I perceive that if Absalom were alive and all us were dead today then you would be pleased. Now therefore arise, go out and speak kindly to your servants; for I swear by the Lord if you do not go, not a man will stay with you this night; and this will be worse for you that all the evil that has come upon you from your youth until now." 2 Samuel 19: 5-7.

I have come to admire Joab's loyalty and directness. He must have been a brilliant commander, and here he takes that loyalty to the limit, commanding the king to come to his senses, pointing out to him in no uncertain terms that he needs to rise above his despair and unite his people and his army or he will truly lose it all.

In 1986, Weisel received the Nobel prize for a lecture of his in which he talked about this despair. In it he refers to Job and all that he had lost and how even Job out of his despair was able to start again. When we lift ourselves up from such tragedies, it is a rebellion against defeat, and Weisel makes the additional point that "faith is essential to any rebellion."

Maybe I should take more plane flights, but again I stopped and thought about this "rebellion and faith" concept and could see the truth in it.

Ultimately, for David, for Job, for many of us – it is the same faith that we feel has not been fair – upon which we rely to rebel against the depths that would destroy us. There is something in the faith and belief system that re-emerges after a period of grief and brings forth the return of hopefulness in small and ever-increasing amounts. That's not to say there aren't moments, sometimes many of them... but eventually we learn to re-live in the same faith only a bit stronger, even more important to us – because someone we have loved is now there. Does that make any sense?

After Joab's words to David, David gets up and goes to the people and eventually unites all the tribes under his command. How many of us, those we know, hopefully nations on the brink of cease-fires, and others have come out of tragedy to rise again in ways that might never have been imagined? Crazy how this stuff works... hopeful, nonetheless.

Again, Weisel: "Because I remember - I have despair, because I have memory - I have the duty to reject despair." Yes, it is finally because of our faith and our memory of all that faith holds and what it has meant to us - that we reject despair.

For those who have read or listened to the New Testament, we know that even Jesus knew such moments. Who could not have felt the anguish when he called out from the cross:

“Eli, Eli, la’ma sa-bach-tha’ni? My God, My God why have you forsaken me?

Some say that at this moment of great stress and pain, Jesus was reciting and meditating on the Psalms, in particular Psalm 22, a psalm that pious Jews used in times of adversity:

“My God, my God, why has thou forsaken me? Why art thou so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but thou dost not answer: and by night, but find no rest. Yet thou art holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel. In thee our fathers trusted: they trusted, and thou didst deliver them. To thee they cried, and were saved; in thee they trusted and were not disappointed.” Psalm 22: 1-5.

Yes, memory calls us from despair. It is curious that in such a place both the anguish and the trust reside. It is as though a struggle beyond our consciousness takes place there, one in which faith triumphs for those who are willing to believe...even if they don't quite know that they believe.

Today, far from the times of David and Jesus, many of us call ourselves such believers. Honestly, I am not sure what that means – but I know what it is. When John wrote his gospel about 100 years after the death Jesus, he most likely had little contact with anyone who had actually known Jesus or had seen his works. Already, the process of memory had begun its kaleidoscopic ways of replicating upon itself, like some subconscious fractal.

John was, in some ways, as far from Jesus in his times as we are in our times. But, what he was closer to was the uneven formation of our faith and the persecution, fear, and the mystical response in which believers and signs flourished – flourished in spite of the potential for great despair. So much so, that the “I sayings” of Jesus take on great poetic meaning and soul nourishment:

“I am the Bread of Life, those who come to me shall not hunger, and they who believe in me shall never thirst.”

You probably would only think about such things if you were soul hungry or thirsty. Right?

How often in times of trouble we find ourselves repeating something of meaning to help us through:

“I am the Bread of Life, those who come to me shall not hunger, and they who believe in me shall never thirst.”

If life is anything, it is a time of joy and lament and joy. The ultimate joy is the promise that the New Testament brings us today, a joy that beyond this veil God is working and accessible.

For weeks now, we have prayed for many things, including resolution to the Middle East conflagration. Tomorrow, God willing, at this time – a cease fire will be in effect.

I know, I just know...that politics and world pressure aside, there is something that these nations have in their memory and hearts, something beyond the warring and the animus that calls them to reject despair and unabated destruction. There is, I pray, a Bread of Life in their beliefs that triumphs over the ancient struggle that like a volcano has erupted once again, spewing its poison. There is hope this morning that the fighting will end. Hope, even, for peace.

And it is there, in that place, that I will end this morning's comments where they began, once more with the words of Elie Weisel. When asked what he did to get through the difficult times in his life, he replied that most of all, “I just went on praying...”

May we do the same – go on praying, for one another and all the others on this planet which we struggle to share. And may we remember...

Amen.