

## *At the Death of Peter Knauert: Peter amid Remembering and Hoping*

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*The sermon and the testimony of Leigh Knauert that follow are statements made at a memorial service for Peter Knauert. Peter was fourteen and had committed suicide. His death, moreover, was in the wake of the death of his father David, Leigh's husband, only a brief time before. Thus the grief on that occasion was deeply compounded for us all. A fine caring congregation gathered that day in Denver to remember, to grieve, and to hope.*

Walter Brueggemann

There are no words to match Peter's death. The depth of loss, sadness, and anger is beyond all of our words. But my assignment is to find words for the loss, sadness, and anger of Leigh and Harrison and Lily and David, and all of us. Maybe I have found some adequate words for this moment..., maybe not. The best words may be in the old Book of Lamentations. It is a long poem of grief about the loss of Jerusalem when Jerusalem was destroyed. The city was so loved and treasured, and then it was gone in a flash, lost in destruction and devastation. The city was so beloved that it had to be grieved for a very long time. I think that poetry is our poetry today. All we have to do is shift the grief of that old beloved city to this well beloved Peter, beloved son, beloved brother, beloved grandson and nephew. We can only speak of our love for Peter the way they loved the city. And now we sink in free fall in grief and loss and anger. So listen to these old words that might be our words: "She weeps bitterly in the night, with tears on her cheeks.... She has none to comfort her (1:2). In its death the city weeps, abandoned, with none to comfort. The poet watches the people who pass by and are too busy. They do not even notice, even when we want them to stop and pay attention to this unbearable loss:

Is it nothing to you, all of you who pass by?  
Look and see  
If there is any sorrow like my sorrow,  
When this was brought on me  
in the day of fierce anger. (1:12)

The poet knows that our sorrow on this day is like no other sorrow that has ever been. No one has grieved with us in the loss of the city, or in the loss of beloved Peter. And even God could not escape the loss, so we ask about God's failure and implication in our loss.

The poet's grief touches our bodies in anguish:

From on high he sent fire;  
it went deep into my bones;  
He spread a net for my feet;

He turned me back;  
He has left me stunned, faint all day long. (1:13)

The loss moves into our bones, so that we can hardly stand it. It leaves us stunned. We are left with only tears of sadness or of anger.

For these things I weep;  
my eyes flow with tears;  
for a comforter is far from me;  
no one to revive my courage.  
My children are desolate, for the enemy has prevailed. (1:16)

There is no consolation; any possible comfort is remote from us, and we refuse to be comforted in his death. Nobody can receive our anger, and our children, these children, are left in their own abandonment. The poet gives us words for the anguish of our bodies, without much sleep, with no appetite, only the food of salty tears:

See, O Lord, how distressed I am;  
My stomach churns,  
My heart is wrung within me....  
On the street it is like a sword cuts to the heart,  
In the house it is like death.  
They heard how I was groaning with no one to comfort me. (1:21)

The poetry dares to line out the way in which God has been absent to need:

He has filled me with bitterness; he has sated me with wormwood.  
He has made my teeth grind on gravel,  
And made me cower in ashes;  
My soul is bereft of peace;  
I have forgotten what happiness is;  
So I say, "Gone is my glory,  
and all that I had hoped for from the Lord."  
The thought of my affliction and my homelessness is wormwood and gall!  
My soul continually thinks of it and is bowed down within me. (3:15-20)

Gone is all we had hoped for. We had such hope for Peter. We hoped him such a bright, alert, agile young man. We hoped him the man in the family, and he stepped up to the plate to fill that role as best he could. But he could not help it that it was too much. Nobody saw coming the rage he felt, not about that one moment of dispute, but about the way life had turned on him with a sense of abandonment. In that moment being possessed beyond himself, he could not bear the anger. And so gone is the wonder and the possibility and the giftedness...all vanished in an instant, all gone, beyond recall. The poet repeats the themes of the day: "None to comfort; No ground for hope." Those surely are our words today.

But then there is a pause in the poem. It is like the pause after the Good Friday

death of Jesus, before the in-breaking of Easter. The poet says:

But...but in spite of that;  
But...but the loss notwithstanding,  
But...but this I call to mind.  
This I remember. This I have not forgotten, even in my loss.  
And therefore I have hope.

I remember and so I hope. And what I remember, says the poet, is this:

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases,  
(not now, not in death; not even death can disrupt God's steadfast  
ness).  
His mercies never come to an end.  
They are new every morning.  
Great is your faithfulness. (3:22-23)

The memory of God's people is saturated with God's action and steadfast love, mercy, and faithfulness. We never stop reciting the miracles of God's self-giving. It is like a mantra to us...steadfast love, mercy, faithfulness. All miracles:

The miracle of life;  
The miracle of a new baby.  
So we remember Peter's birth;  
We remember his first talking that was tentative.  
We remember his first walking that was so precarious.  
We remember his first day of school, a mix of eagerness and timidity.  
We remember the moment when he fell in love with the Celtics.  
We remember the joy of his baptism.

All gifts, all gifts from God, followed by the miracles of Harrison and Lily and David. And we remember the gifts of father David, his strength and his power and faithfulness, gifts he has given to his children. And, says the poet, all these miracles in our lives are gifts of God's active steadfast love, mercy, and faithfulness.

God continues to do that. We remember such acts, and we hope for them again. We know that Peter in this moment, for all our loss and bewilderment and anger and remorse, is located exactly in this steadfast love, mercy, and faithfulness from God. And so are we!

That will carry him well beyond any anger he knew to a place of well-being with abiding mercy and faithfulness. And we ourselves, in our season of grief, are held by the same truth of God's steadfast love, mercy, and faithfulness that is not disrupted by his death or by our grief.

I do know, Leigh, Lily, Harrison, and David, that these are at the moment empty words for you and will not comfort. But we will hold to them for you. We will remember the old gifts and will continue to watch for the new gifts that are sure to be given. We will hold Peter's life and our lives to the truth of the Gospel of God's deep, reliable presence. Because God's absence is for a moment in the night, and joy comes

only later, in the morning.

Here we are with our words and with many tears. But the reservoir of our faith is deep and resilient, and so we locate Peter's death in the midst of that faith that surpasses all of our anguish and pain. In the Heidelberg Catechism, a wondrous Reformation statement of our faith, the first question of the teaching is this: "What is our only comfort, in life and in death?"

This is an urgent question, given that the poet has said over and over, "There is none to comfort."

And the answer in the catechism is this: "My only comfort is that I belong—body and soul, in life and in death—not to myself, but to my faithful savior, Jesus Christ who has completely freed me from the dominion of evil." We belong to Christ in his faithfulness! Peter belongs to him! And so do we! The catechism answer goes on to say, "He protects me so well that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, that everything must fit his purpose for my salvation."

This is the truth for us in this day of loss and death. All of our sadness and anger and bewilderment are held in the heart of God who knows the hair on our heads and the yearning of our hearts and the our hunger for wellbeing. Peter is left to rest in that good assurance. And we, in our turn, can rest there as well. The God who birthed us and knows us and counts our hairs is the one we know in steadfast love, mercy, and faithfulness. That is our only comfort. We wait for that comfort to come among us. It is poised and will come for us in time to come.

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## *Words for Peter*

Leigh Knauert  
Denver, Colorado

For those of you who do not know, I am Peter's mom. I thought it was important for you to hear from Peter's mom today. I thought it was important because when I think about my situation as someone else's, I can't help but think that the first place I would go in my mind would be to the mother, in this case the only surviving parent. How is she doing? What is she thinking? How can she survive another tragedy? What will she do? How can they go on? Although I don't know the answers to most of these questions, I do feel called to tell you at least part of what it is like to be me right now.

I have had the privilege over the past nine years to be exposed to a man who has taught me more about survival than anyone. I was married to one of his most prized students and am very close friends with two of his others. Walter Brueggemann's years of work on the psalms has provided me with much of what I have needed to deal with the death of my husband, David. Because of Walter's work and his presence in my life through my darkest days, I have been reminded that my cries of pain have to be uttered, whether through soft and controlled words or through literal shouts and screams. The psalms are our Biblical model of the utterance of pain making possible the sight of hope. Once we have cried out and have felt heard, we are then able to move to a new place. Only because my cries have been heard, by God and by many of you, have I been able to stand in this new place and enter into the healing that has