

# *Deal Gently*

by

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Psalm 130

Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD.

<sup>2</sup> Lord, hear my voice!

Let your ears be attentive  
to the voice of my supplications!

<sup>3</sup> If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities,  
Lord, who could stand?

<sup>4</sup> But there is forgiveness with you,  
so that you may be revered.

<sup>5</sup> I wait for the LORD, my soul waits,  
and in his word I hope;

<sup>6</sup> my soul waits for the Lord  
more than those who watch for the morning,  
more than those who watch for the morning.

<sup>7</sup> O Israel, hope in the LORD!  
For with the LORD there is steadfast love,  
and with him is great power to redeem.

<sup>8</sup> It is he who will redeem Israel  
from all its iniquities.

2 Samuel 18:5-9,15,31-33

King David ordered Joab and Abishai and Ittai, saying, “Deal gently for my sake with the young man Absalom.” And all the people heard when the king gave orders to all the commanders concerning Absalom.

6 So the army went out into the field against Israel; and the battle was fought in the forest of Ephraim. 7 The men of Israel were defeated there by the servants of David, and the slaughter there was great on that day, twenty thousand men. 8 The battle spread over the face of all the country; and the forest claimed more victims that day than the sword.

9 Absalom happened to meet the servants of David. Absalom was riding on his mule, and the mule went under the thick branches of a great oak. His head caught fast in the oak, and he was left hanging between heaven and earth, while the mule that was under him went on.

15 And ten young men, Joab’s armor-bearers, surrounded Absalom and struck him, and killed him.

31 Then the Cushite came [to David]; and the Cushite said, “Good tidings for my lord the king! For the Lord has vindicated you this day, delivering you from the power of all who rose up against you.” 32 The king said to the Cushite, “Is it well with the young man Absalom?” The Cushite answered, “May the enemies of my lord the king, and all who rise up to do you harm, be like that young man.”

33 The king was deeply moved, and went up to the chamber over the gate, and wept; and as he went, he said, “O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!”

There are few more wrenching scenes in the Bible than that of David's grief when he learns that Absalom has been killed. David is undone, his grief is palpable, stretching across millennia and into our hearts this morning. We feel his sorrow, like he is a close friend of this community. Many of us know and recognize the cry of David's loss without understanding any of the complexities of the relationship between David and Absalom. His son is dead, nothing else matters. Not the war he has won, nor the kingdom he has to reclaim, nor the other children who remain. Absalom, his son, is all he can see. He is lost in grief.

Absalom was David's third son, born to Maacah in Hebron. Frederick Buechner summarizes Absalom's life history for us. He writes, "Almost from the start, Absalom had a number of strikes against him. For one thing, he was much too handsome for his own good, and his special pride was such a magnificent head of hair that once a year when he had it trimmed, the trimmings alone tipped the scales at three and a half pounds. For another thing, his father, King David, was always either spoiling him rotten or reading him the riot act. This did not promote stability of character. He murdered his lecherous brother Amnon for fooling around with their sister, Tamar, and when the old war-horse Joab wouldn't help him patch things up with David afterward, he set fire to his hay field. All Israel found this kind of derring-do irresistible, of course, and when he eventually led a revolt against his father, a lot of them joined up."<sup>1</sup>

Absalom's rebellion leads to his death. He usurps his father's throne but is later killed by the King's army. It is his beautiful head of hair that gets caught fast in a tree, leaving Absalom hanging between heaven and earth. Scholars say that the Hebrew used to describe this scene is obscure, reflecting the reticence of the narrator or the inability of the tradition to express what in fact happened, because it is so dark

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Peculiar Treasurer: A Biblical Who's Who* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 6.

and ominous.<sup>2</sup> After hearing about his son's death this is also where David finds himself: suspended between reality and disbelief, unable to translate into words what he is feeling because it is too painful.

Earlier in the story David has spoken of Absalom as, "the young man, Absalom." But now, Absalom is "my son," which David repeats five times in anguish and grief. David has reclaimed the kingdom, but he has lost his son. And even the king can't make Absalom alive again.

You need not have gone through something as horrific as this story of David and Absalom, to recognize the pain described. Grief is grief, and all of us have experienced it in different forms. Author Anne Lamott spoke about this in an interview several years ago. She said, "You will lose someone you can't live without, and your heart will be badly broken, and the bad news is that you never completely get over the loss of your beloved. But this is also the good news. They live forever in your broken heart that doesn't seal back up. And you come through. It's like having a broken leg that never heals perfectly—that still hurts when the weather gets cold, but you learn to dance with the limp."

As one of your pastors, I am privileged to walk alongside many of you as you grieve. I say "privileged" because I believe that we are at our most vulnerable when we are genuinely grieving, and to invite someone else into that space with us is one of the most courageous actions we can take.

I hear a lot of the same questions from people who are grieving. The most common include, "Am I grieving the right way?" "Is this what I am supposed to be doing? What it is supposed to feel like?" "How long will this last?" These are honest questions, spoken from the depths of uncertainty caused by the unmooring of life. Grieving is often a foreign path, and the journey can be overwhelming. When pushed I give the most honest responses I know, responses I believe to be faithful. I say,

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<sup>2</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, Interpretation: A Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1990), 319.

“everyone grieves differently,” “you are only ‘supposed to do’ what helps you continue walking forward,” “I do not know how long you’ll grieve in this way, but your church will be here for you all along the way. You will probably grieve forever, and that’s ok.”

More often, though, I go to the Psalms, and seek the wisdom and experience of those who have gone before us. Psalm 130 is one of those psalms whose words I have traced more times than I can remember, whose pain and promise is just as true today as when it was penned: “Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord, hear my voice!... I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in God’s word I hope; my soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning.” Anyone who has grieved knows that the depths of pain and suffering can usually silence you, making it hard to speak, move, or know which way is up. Scholar James Mays says, “to be in the depths is to be where death prevails instead of life as prospect and power, where the authentic word about existence is ‘I am lost.’”<sup>3</sup> Out of the depths, from the pit of loneliness, the psalmist cries to God. While it does not matter where we are when we pray, prayer is never more real than when it rises out of the hardest places. The depths can produce deep devotion.

We all go through the depths. They are part of life. As C.S. Lewis wrote, “We were promised sufferings. They were part of the program. We were even told, ‘Blessed are they that mourn,’ and I accept it. I’ve got nothing that I hadn’t bargained for.”<sup>4</sup> Sufferings will come to all of us – to the just and the unjust alike – but the good news is that none of us has to journey through our sufferings unaccompanied.

First, when we suffer, God suffers along with us. Years ago, Alex Coffin, the son of William Sloane Coffin, then the pastor of the Riverside Church in New York City, died in a car accident in Boston.

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<sup>3</sup> James L. Mays, *Psalms*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1994), 406.

<sup>4</sup> C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (New York: HarperOne, 2009), 36.

Thirteen days after he lost his son, William Sloane Coffin climbed into the pulpit of that church and preached one of his most well-known sermons that began, “As almost all of you know, a week ago last Monday night, driving in a terrible storm, my son Alexander...who enjoyed beating his old man at every game and in every race, beat his father to the grave...” “When a person dies,” Coffin preached, “there are many things that can be said, and there is at least one thing that should never be said. The night after Alex died I was sitting in the living room of my sister’s house outside Boston, when the front door opened and in came a lady with about eighteen quiches. When she saw me she shook her head, then headed for the kitchen, saying sadly over her shoulder, ‘I just don’t understand the will of God...’” Coffin said, “The one thing that should never be said when someone dies is ‘It is the will of God.’ Never do we know enough to say that. My own consolation,” Coffin concluded, “lies in knowing that it was not the will of God that Alex die; that when the waves closed over his sinking car, God’s heart was the first of all our hearts to break.”<sup>5</sup>

We worship a God who knows what it means to suffer, to lose a child, to go through something painful and heart-wrenching. When we suffer, God suffers along with us.

Second, when we suffer, we do not do so in isolation, but as a community. At the end of Psalm 130, the psalmist shifts from their individual perspective to a communal one, “O Israel, hope in the Lord! For with the Lord there is steadfast love, and with God is great power to redeem.” Communal support through grief is there even when we cannot bear to talk to someone else. By being part of the church of Jesus Christ, you receive support not only from God, but from those alongside whom you worship. This congregation is full of people who care for you; so lean on them. Each of you is a gift to one another.

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<sup>5</sup> William Sloane Coffin, “Alex’s Death,” in *The Collected Sermons of William Sloane Coffin, the Riverside Years*, vol. 2 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 3-4.

Finally, even after we pass through the depths of suffering, we will still be shaped by our experience, and that is a good thing. At the conclusion of their pioneering book *On Grief and Grieving*, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and David Kessler write, “The reality is that you will grieve forever. You will not “get over” the loss of a loved one; you will learn to live with it. You will heal and you will rebuild yourself around the loss you have suffered. You will be whole again but you will never be the same. Nor should you be the same nor would you want to.”<sup>6</sup>

For King David, this meant he was a bit more forgiving of those who had plotted against him, pardoning rather than killing some of his adversaries. He could not bring back his son, but he did not want to send other people’s sons to their graves.

For William Sloane Coffin it meant a shift in his theology, an embrace of a God who knows what it means to suffer, and whose heart breaks when ours does.

My prayer for you is that when you grieve – whether it is the loss of a child like David, or the loss of a dream, an ability, or an imagined future for which you had so desperately hoped – that you open yourself up to the changes it makes in you. Journeying through grief with God, yourself, and your community will reform you. You will not be the same, and I pray you do not try to be.

And remember, grief and suffering do not have the last word. Death is not the end. Life is. In that is our hope. You and I and the faithful of the ages struggle to trust that story. We try to live into such hope. We risk supporting and being close to others for it to be true. We risk dreaming, and loving, and caring for things and people because it makes life worthwhile. Because embedded in the story of life, grief, and death, is a God who loves us and journeys alongside us today and every

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<sup>6</sup> Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and David Kessler, *On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief Through the Five Stages of Loss* (New York: Scribner, 2014), 230.

day. Amidst the tensions, the pain, the struggle, our God and this community will be by your side. Thanks be to God.

Amen.