

“Michael’s Death”¹
Isaiah 43:1-7; Psalm 44:1-3, 8, 13-26
Rev. Andrew Connors
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Proper 20

Like so many of you who have shared your experiences of Michael’s death with me, my emotions in these last days have run the gamut. I have felt a deep, deep sorrow for my loss, and for ours - he was not only one of the best organists in the land, an extraordinary talent who could play anything just by listening to it, he was also a quintessential team player - he was willing to go outside of his training and discipline to make church interesting, engaging and authentic. There’s no other classically trained church musician that I know who was *both willing and capable* of finding a drag queen to sing “I will survive” at the end of a beloved member’s memorial service, or play the Saturday Night Live musical riff to “Debbie Downer” for a Tim Hughes Williams’ sermon, or conduct Soulful Revue in a rendition of “Shake that Booty in the Name of Jesus.” And he was one of the kindest people I ever knew - a person who knew not only the names of all of our family members, but also the names of our pets. The guy who brought the donuts to our staff meetings. The person who always asked, “what can I do for you” and really followed through on however I answered that question.

Alongside the sorrow I have felt deep gratitude - for ten years of a close relationship with yet another extraordinary musician who, like his predecessor, truly was a *minister* of music. Ten years of working with someone I not only loved but also really like spending time with. Gratitude that God would gift the world and the church with Michael and gift me personally with such a wonderful colleague and friend. And yes, even gratitude that Michael is finally at rest. This lover of his job who could only really rest when he and [his husband] George headed to the beach which wasn’t often enough. I’m grateful that this man who worked at least two lifetimes into the span of one is finally at peace.

Alongside the gratitude I have also felt fear. Life is even more fragile than I wanted to admit. Michael is the second chief musician in Brown Memorial’s history who has died in office. His illness is still a mystery to the doctors who treated him. It’s frightening to know that death has so much power to intrude upon our living, aggressive and unannounced.

Alongside the fear I have also felt trust in the God of our ancestors - a deepening sense that life is a gift and that God is with us in all the sorrow and the fear and the loss and the hope. Trust born out of the knowledge that I am not the first person to have

¹ Brown Memorial’s Minister of Music, Michael Britt, died on Wednesday, September 14, 2022 after an unexplained illness left him on a ventilator in the hospital for more than three weeks.

walked through unimaginable loss. And a real confidence in knowing that God has given us this community precisely because we are not creatures who are intended to grieve alone. Love not only begets love, in the words of Bill Coffin, it transmits strength.² We are shrouded in this prayer blanket of a church to support us, especially when tragedy strikes.

Alongside the trust I have felt anger. Anger at Michael for always burning the candle at both ends even after repeatedly warning him that his pace seemed unsustainable to many of us. How many times did I tell him that no one here expected him to say yes to anybody and everybody who asked him to do something. But also anger at God that some anonymous bacteria or pathogen has the power to attack someone who is so kind and loving to everyone he knows. There must be a million other people whose deaths would make more sense than Michael. Why him? Why now? Why so suddenly without the chance for any of us, especially his husband to prepare or even say goodbye?

I know it's customary for a preacher to clean it all up, to tell you that, in the end, God has the last word, which is something that I do believe about 80% of the time. But I've learned not only from my experience but also from our texts that questions about God's absence, or God's inability or refusal to act, or God's arbitrariness that occupy that other 20% of this walk of faith also deserve a hearing.

As a Christian I did not learn until I was in seminary that the biblical library we call the Bible held psalms like Psalm 44 that I read today. I had been taught that it's dangerous to question God, much less speak to God in the accusatory, angry language of this psalmist: "Get up, God! Why do you sleep, Lord?" "Why do you hide your face?" No one I knew ever dared speak to God like that.

Yet, at age 16, when the seven year-old best friend of my little sister and member of my church died in a freak tornado, I wish someone would have shown me these texts. I wish I had learned about Moses getting angry with God for not delivering the Israelites as God had promised. I wish I had learned that some of the prophets cried out to God in protest over God's failure to live up to the promises they felt compelled to remind God that she had made. I wish someone had shown me Jesus weeping at the tomb of Lazarus in his grief, or speaking back the words of Psalm 22 while hanging on the cross - "my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Because if someone had shown me those texts and those words then I might not have run from the church. I might have learned then that my faith and the church is big enough, and broad enough, and sophisticated enough to hold it all. I might have learned that loving each other in all of our faith and our doubt is what the church is for.

Walter Brueggemann will be remembered for many things when his time comes. But I think he'll be remembered most for showing us all that the Bible contains what he termed dominant testimony and counter-testimony. The dominant testimony being the

² "Alex's Death," Sermon by William Sloane Coffin, January 23, 1983.

words that we are accustomed to hearing in church - that God's steadfast love is gracious and generous. That God is faithful and trustworthy and good. And the counter-testimony, naming a much riskier experience of God - that God sometimes seems absent, or less powerful than we thought, or more arbitrary and inconsistent than God is supposed to be.³ In the wisdom of our Bible, the counter-testimony was never silenced, as if our ancestors knew that sometimes anger at God is faithful. Sometimes questioning God is exactly what's called for. Sometimes screaming the chasm between your experience of injustice and the promises God has made is exactly what is needed to keep your faith alive, maybe even to rouse God from inaction.

And I'm so relieved that the dominant testimony and the counter-testimony are both preserved by our texts because I've been with enough of you in these last difficult days to know that our experience of Michael's death is as varied and diverse as those in scripture. Some of you have been angrier than I've ever seen you. Others are immovable in your conviction of God's eternal love and care in this moment and time. A few of you, new to the community, or barely connected to Michael are having an entirely different experience than someone like me who nearly saw Michael everyday of my waking life. We have to find a way to hold the space for each other in the days ahead. Because I am convinced that wrestling with the absence of God is no less faithful of an act than those of you who have found the comfort of complete trust.

The late Rabbi David Hartman once reminded an interviewer that one of the Psalms says "Joyful are those who *seek* God" not those who *find* God." When the rabbis dealt with this challenge of a hopeless God, he said, they told the old Hasidic story of two children playing hide and seek. The one who was hiding started crying. And they asked him, why are you crying, and he said, because no one is looking for me. And the rabbis said, now you know how God feels. No one is looking for me.⁴

I don't know what's going to happen to us over the next couple of months. Grief is such an unpredictable, personalized experience. Sure, we know that grief can include anger, denial, bargaining, depression and acceptance. But it often unfolds in unpredictable, even unwelcome ways.

But in our grief, I think a lot of us are going to be doing a lot of searching. And that is entirely appropriate. Indeed, if you think you have the answers of why Michael is dead in this way at age 61 with so much more to give, I'm not ready to hear your conclusions just yet. Yes, I know that God's love holds us in death just as it holds us in life. I know that none of us is guaranteed any sort of longevity. Yes, I know that others have died much younger, under much worse circumstances. I know all that. Maybe it will be a comfort for me at some point in the future.

³ Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press), 1997.

⁴ Rabbi David Hartman interview by Krista Tippett, *On Being*, September 22, 2011, <https://onbeing.org/programs/david-hartman-hope-in-a-hopeless-god/>

But what I need the most right now is the confidence of knowing that if I need to rage, I want to be able to rage. And if I need to cry, I want to be able to cry. And if I need to laugh, I want to be able to laugh. And if I need to protest, I want to be able to protest. And I want to create the same loving space for each of you. The space to seek God trusting that if God wants to be found, God will surely make it happen.

When the late Bill Coffin, pastor of Riverside Church in NY lost his 24 year-old son Alex in a devastating auto accident, he told his congregation that 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," he said. "My own consolation lies in knowing that it was not the will of God that Alex die; that when the waves closed over the sinking car, God's heart was the first of all our hearts to break."⁵ It was a remarkable insight in what is perhaps one of the greatest sermons ever preached.

But what a lot of people don't know and didn't see is Bill Coffin earlier that same week alone with his then wife, Ava, inside the Cambridge, MA church where their son's casket had been brought for the funeral. Bill and Ava were sobbing, wailing - waves of inconsolable grief and sorrow.⁶

Grief is a process like this - a journey that can empty out your hope one moment and overrun your cup the next - completely outside your control. But so is the journey of faith. More like a wrestling match with God than an afternoon tea. Something that buoys you beyond belief but also sometimes breaks you. As we move forward together into this unfamiliar territory, we can and we will take comfort from all the dominant testimony that our liturgy and our texts will throw at us. Testimony that assures us that God's love for Michael could never be snuffed out. Testimony that assures us that there is a dwelling place with God that we cannot understand and it is lovely. In the words of Bill Coffin, if a lamp went out last week, it meant at least for Michael the Dawn had come.⁷

But if you find yourself straying from that well worn path, raging with the senselessness of this loss, you are in good company. Some of us have waded through those thickets before and may need to go there again. When we do, we aren't running from the faith - we are living it - *seeking* God, hoping that she may be found.

And as I ponder how to love you all and be loved by you in this difficult time, it strikes me that Michael has already taught us what we need to know. We need to learn how to bring the donuts for each other, how to learn who likes a cup of coffee and who prefers one with tea. We'll need to do a better job at learning not only the names of our human family members but also the names of each others' pets. Which is to say, we'll need to learn how to love each other in the unique ways that each of us desires while

⁵ "Alex's Death," January 23, 1983.

⁶ John Walker, the Organist and Choir Director for Riverside Church at the time, shared with me this story from his first hand experience early that morning in the all but empty church.

⁷ "Alex's Death."

we grieve, while we wonder, while we rage, while we hope, while we seek God. We'll need to be with each other in loving kindness, just as our Minister of Music taught us.