



CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

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## WITH TEARS AND ELEGIES

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*Lead Minister*

**Text: 2 Samuel 1:1, 17–27**

I was 16 years old when a death from AIDS became for me more than just a story on the nightly news about unknown gay men from New York or San Francisco. This particular death was of a young man who was the son of my father's clergy friend. I remembered him because he was a popular and talented young man who became the source of much gossip and rejection when he left home years earlier to live openly and honestly as a gay man. Through the silences and whispers, I understood that he came home to die. How the mighty had fallen. But there was no public mourning for him. There were few tears and no elegies. There was no reckoning with grief, anger, or confusion. No words or songs that would bear witness honestly and openly to the moment. Unfortunately, the shame and silence echo in my mind so many years later.

The tears and elegies for those fallen in the midst of the battle against AIDS would eventually come. From the marginal spaces of the mutual aid and hospice care, from LGBTQ clergy and their allies in small sacred spaces unseen and unknown by many, through tears and elegies of collective mourning, communities gave voice to the loss and hurt they experienced when greatness around them was brought low by a deadly disease. They dared to stand up and sing their grief, intentionally constructing wisdom and memory in their lamentations.

During the week of the presidential inauguration this past January, the President-Elect invited churches and faith leaders from all over the nation to join together at the same hour for an interfaith prayer vigil to remember, memorialize, and honor those who died from COVID-19. In a nationally televised memorial service, and here in our community surrounded by my clergy colleagues, we publicly grieved with mournful wails that the mighty among us had fallen. Despite some of the naysayers, for a brief moment, politics and disagreement were set aside for a moment of national grief about the losses we have experienced because of a deadly disease that felled too many. With tears and elegies of loss, grief, anger, and protest, people of faith gathered in beloved community, intoning a lamentation for those who died from COVID-19 that years from now will serve as enduring wisdom and theological truth.

Counselors will remind us that people cope with loss and grief in different ways: shock, denial, sadness, anger, distress, and anxiety to name a few. But I wonder if we, believers in God's goodness and promises, can grieve as a collective more often. Dare we the Church stand in the public square to offer public expressions of our grief, singing our hurt and mourning what we have lost?

David, the one after God's own heart, learned that relationship with God does not shield anyone from loss and grief. And he seizes the moment faithfully. Scholars often refer to this part of the story of Israel we read today as the "rise of David." But David's rise begins in a moment of devastating loss and grief. Israel is utterly defeated, and her king, Saul, and the crown prince, Jonathan, are killed. With Saul's death, David's pathway to the throne becomes that much easier. This could be a moment for David to press his advantage and pursue a strategy for becoming king of Israel. David could have reminded people that Saul tried to kill him and that Jonathan really supported David over his father. But when David hears that Saul and

Jonathan have been killed, there are no revels and celebrations. He recites no epic verses about his own exploits in audition for the job as king. Rather, he sings his grief and the grief of God's people: How the mighty have fallen; Israel's glory lies slain upon your high places; the shield of the mighty was defiled; O daughters of Israel, weep. Politics, strategy, and competition for power can wait. It does not matter who was on Team Saul or Team David. Apportioning blame or rehashing old conflicts will not reveal new insight. David dares to make space for grief and lament. Death may come, but "righteousness is immortal."

David's mournful wail of a lament gives voice to what it means to live through a transition; to confront the mix of emotions a community feels when what has been no longer is; to speak and sing words of truth that also prepare them for the future. Through tears and elegies, David and Israel will leave both a record and a testimony for their posterity and for all of us who dare to trust God in moments of distress. They knew what we glean from their witness: There is enduring wisdom and theological truth in words and hymns of lamentation, in mournful wails that invite generations to pause and learn from what thus said the Lord to a people who were courageous enough to cry.

I am reminded of the words and music of what we call "Negro Spirituals," passed down to us from the cotton fields of slave plantations. Songs of lament and victory riding on chords and melodies of hope, preaching to us even now, God's promise for us in our darkest moments.

We at Plymouth Church have been through a great deal of change and challenge over the last few years. Internally, we have had to say farewell to people, practices, and artifacts that have been a part of our story. We are coping with a pandemic that interrupted our worship and gathered life together. Communally, we have shared in the hurt, anger, and shame visited upon our city because of the murder of the George Floyd and many others. And we stand at ground zero of a reckoning with racial disparities, injustice, and inequality. Over that time, we have used words, songs, prayers, and music to process our emotions and express our grief and loss. And as we expressed our grief through tears and elegies, there is a palpable sense that we are in the middle of a turning in our collective lives. We most certainly would not have chosen nor did any of us expect to mark this turning with this experience of loss and death. And yet, in the midst of it all, we pray, we sing, and we cry; sharing the enduring wisdom and theological truth that sustain us now.

We have been conditioned to believe that we always have to put the best face on a sad situation . . . that it is heroic to grieve and suffer in silence . . . that the stoic response is the more meaningful approach. But there is power and wisdom in our tears and elegies. They are ostensibly about people, and yet they become their own witness . . . they are the hymns and poetry that accompany us in our journey with God and with each other. Even when extracted from their original context, they give us a testimony that bears witness to our own experience and that echoes long after we have exited the stage. When some dark days come, when the bottom falls out, as it periodically does, when our memory fails and we forget what God has done, can do, and promises to do, may the tears and elegies of this moment echo loudly the ongoing presence of God with us. May it be so.