

Faith Mennonite Church  
March 2, 2008, Lent 4: Lament and Hope

Groaning and Longing  
*Job 23:1-5; 8-10; Romans 8:18-27; 35-39*

Two weeks ago today, Joan Kreider and Neil Okerlund shared reflections with us on the meaning of birth and rebirth. Joan vividly recalled the wonder and danger of the human birth process and likened God to a mother who painfully labors in the rebirth of each of us as we grow into our humanity throughout our lives. Neil eloquently spoke of the rebirth of a friendship as he has remained constant with a friend who has suffered painful and unpleasant physical ills.

The loss of Mike Schrock on Monday morning this week feels like a miscarriage – like a birth gone terribly wrong, terminated before its intended time. The suddenness of his death leaves us longing for the opportunity to have cradled him in his dying, to have sat in vigil of constancy with him and to have said our goodbyes, *if* we had to let him go.

The words of Job and the passage from Romans contain the lament that we wail from the depth of our beings and the hope that we cling to in times of tragedy such as this. With Job we complain and feel abandoned; why? we ask. Why now?—when Mike had just made a satisfying professional move, was adjusting with Erin to an empty nest and taking great pride in the development and accomplishments of his sons; when he still had so much creative energy and such a passion for making this world a better place. Why such a death to someone so tender, who loved his family dearly, yet had so much additional love in him for all the children of this church, and for his special Ethiopian family. When I read Job’s words “I would lay my case before [God] and fill my mouth with arguments” I hear the word “unfair” that echoed in so many conversations this week.

The story of Job may well have been written for such an experience of loss and grief as ours. In the dialogue between Job and his friends we find two responses: Job’s friends need to find the cause, need to place responsibility and find a human source to blame, even if it is Job himself. Job, on the other hand, has lived an upright life and asks for his day in court with God; he holds God responsible for the misfortune. When Job and his friends have finally exhausted themselves in trying to explain the cause of suffering, the voice of God has the final say.

That voice reframes the debate. On first read it feels like a rebuke of Job, but as the voice of God describes the order of the universe and the power of a storm, one is swept away to a place like the Boundary Waters. There in the hushed stillness of million-year-old rock, scarred and rubbed smooth by glaciers, where pine trees cling tenaciously to rock with hardly a trace of soil to nourish their exposed roots, where beavers are the architects and builders, and where eagles soar and loons call, we realize that our world, which has suddenly become very small in this tragedy, is indeed an immense universe far beyond our comprehension.

And with the apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans, we acknowledge that we live in a world that is in bondage to decay. Despite all of the earth’s rich beauty and all of the deep joys

we experience in friendship, family, and in our daily labors and leisure, we know that tragedy and pain exist; they are part of the human condition. Mike's death thrusts us into the groaning and labor pains of creation as it awaits a time when we will be gathered into the fullness of God. And we can be assured that God, the creator and parent of us all, groaned too as Mike was born into eternal life, and as we continue in this birthing process.

With Job, we continue walking by faith, weak as it may be. Although we may not feel God's presence or understand the meaning of this tragedy, we have come together today as a community of faith, and with Job we feebly whisper, "But [God] knows the way that [we] take; when [God] has tested [us], [we] shall come out like gold."

Our grieving will take time. We will have days when we will be tempted to pull the covers over our heads and pretend that nothing has happened. Slowly we will begin to find that the only meaning of this tragedy will be in the new reality that we create. This reality will be based in the memory and legacy of Mike's life. It will be embodied by each of us as we continue the work that Mike is no longer here to do – nurturing the children of this church and our neighborhoods, living by the highest ethical standards, dreaming and building new and more sustainable infrastructure in our communities, being a people of Jesus' way of peace and working for justice within and beyond these walls. And it will be guided and nourished by the power of God's Spirit and cheered on by the great cloud of witnesses, the communion of saints that has two new smiling members, Dellis and Mike.

The German pastor and theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who also died an untimely, violent death, once wrote of death, saying:

Nothing can make up for the absence of someone whom we love...It is nonsense to say that God fills the gap; God doesn't fill it, but on the contrary, God keeps it empty and so helps us to keep alive our former communion with each other, even at the cost of pain... The dearer and richer our memories, the more difficult the separation. But gratitude changes the pangs of memory into a tranquil joy. The beauties of the past are borne, not as a thorn in the flesh, but as a precious gift in themselves.

Let us not fear or despair. Nothing can separate us from the love of God.

Joetta Schlabach