

Dead Can Dance

(Living the “De Profundis” moment)

*Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD! Lord, hear my voice!
My soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning,
more than those who watch for the morning.
(Psalm 130:1, 6)*

A sermon by Siegfried S. Johnson on the 12th Sunday after Pentecost, **August 27, 2017**
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“*De Profundis*” is how the 130th Psalm opens in Latin. It means, “*Out of the depths*,” a cry of profound desperation (one easily hears the word *profound* in the Latin *profundis*). Oscar Wilde wrote, “*Where there is sorrow, there is holy ground*,” pointing out what the human family knows through experience, the relationship between sorrow and the sacred, between spaces where profound sorrow has been experienced, and the ever after recognized sacredness attached to those places. Whether a simple cross by the side of the road where sudden and unexpected loss occurred, sacred to none but the family whose lives were profoundly impacted by loss, to battlefield remembrances such as Gettysburg or Normandy, to the 9-11 Memorial (as we approach in but a few days the 16th anniversary of that awful Tuesday in American history). Sorrow and the Sacred seem linked, as it were, in a solemnity of remembrance.

Psalm 130, a powerfully poetic expression of utter need from the lowest *De Profundis* moments of human desperation, begins with such sacred solemnity. I share it with you today in order to point out where Psalm 130 ultimately leads us, which is to direct our eyes to the hope which blossoms, however slowly, from the soil of sorrow. Psalm 130 doesn't leave us in the *De Profundis* moment, but rather affirms that as surely as the darkness of night gives way to the dance of dawn's new light, the darkness of our sorrow can be met by God's light and love. “*I wait for the LORD . . . my soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning.*”

I want to share two national *De Profundis* moments -- one in our lifetime, and the other biblical, from the time of King David. During the Bosnian War, Serbian forces besieged the city of Sarajevo. Lasting from 1992 to 1996, it is longest siege of a capital city in the history of modern warfare. Artillery, mortar and sniper fire could kill anyone, anytime, indiscriminately. No place was safe -- home, school, market, hospital. 13,952 people were killed or went missing, another 56,000 wounded, as an average of 300 shell impacts per day occurred, a maximum of 3,777 rockets fired into the city on a single day, July 22, 1993.

Even so, in the midst of such suffering members of the Sarajevo Philharmonic Orchestra, on June 19, 1994, midway through the siege, displayed the indestructibility of the human spirit as they carried their instruments into the open square and performed Mozart's Requiem and more among

the ruins of Sarajevo City Hall, in spite of the fact that seven members of the orchestra had already been killed and twelve wounded, their archive of musical scores severely damaged and many instruments destroyed. They played in defiance of the madness, their music becoming a moment of sanctuary midst the ruins. For Sarajevo, hoping for a new dawn to light their darkness, it was a visceral *De Profundis* cry of despair emerging from primitive places of the soul. On that day music bolstered their spirits to dance midst the ruins.

We've read this morning of our second *De Profundis* moment, our reading straddling both sides of the threshold between First and Second Samuel describing a moment of profound sorrow 3,000 years ago when Israel's first king was killed in battle on the mountains of Gilboa. In 1 Samuel 31 read how the Philistines then desecrated King Saul's body, along with his son Jonathan, displaying their beheaded bodies the walls of nearby Beth Shean. Then, in 2nd Samuel we read (1:17-27) we read how David cries out in despair with what he called "*The Song of the Bow*," his *De Profundis* cry of the heart in order to rally the people.

This is an image of the ruins of Beth Shean in the lower Galilee as they look today, showing the tel (mound) of Old Testament Beth Shean in the background. In the foreground is a small part of the ruins of the Roman city of Jesus' time, one of the cities which from Greek times was known as the Decapolis, meaning The Ten Cities. Matthew mentions the Decapolis after describing how Jesus called the fishermen of the Galilee (only some 25 or 30 miles away from Beth Shean), "*and great crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan*" (4:23-25). It is clear that many who walked these very streets became early followers of Jesus.



Beth Shean (then known by its Greco-Roman name, Scythopolis) was destroyed by the great Golan earthquake of 749 A. D. These columns running along the city's *Cardo* (main street) once was a colonnaded area with beautiful shops. This was the Fifth Avenue shopping area (the Wal Mart and K-Mart areas are in another section outside the view of this photo). The New Testament city sat in the shadow of the ancient tel, where 1,000 years before Jesus the bodies of King Saul and Jonathan were brutally displayed as Israel tottered on the brink of annihilation.

Saul, towering head and shoulders above the rest, now was humiliated in death. On my trips as we leave Beth Shean and begin to drive into mountains of Gilboa, I read David's lamentation for our pilgrims, his *De Profundis* cry: "*Your glory, O Israel, lies slain upon your high places! How the mighty have fallen! Tell it not in Gath, proclaim it not in the streets of Ashkelon, or the daughters of the Philistines will rejoice. You mountains of Gilboa, let there be no dew or rain upon you, nor bounteous fields, for there the shield of the mighty was defiled, the shield of Saul, anointed with oil no more.*"

David clearly intended this lament to be a national rally cry, ordering that this “*Song of the Bow be taught to the people of Judah.*” This is our visceral human reaction to such a staggering loss, the *Song of the Bow* being a military song preparing the people for a new march toward the dawn of a new king. Here, as we saw in Sarajevo, music is powerful in times of sorrow, as if our soul’s restoration needs rhythm and cadence and meter. It’s why Congress became Choir on 9-11, gathering on the Capital steps to sing, *God Bless America*.

I recall as a little boy of 6 or 7, around 1960, sitting next to my dad at Sahara Shrine Temple in Pine Bluff as he played the clarinet for the Shrine Band. Of all the songs they must have played I recall only one in particular, John Philip Sousa’s magnum opus, *Stars and Stripes forever*. It plays in my mind still as I recall looking up at dad, a pilot in World War 2, playing the clarinet. How I delighted at the dotted, playful melody of the piccolo! For that reason, whenever I read of David’s *Song of the Bow*, I think of John Philip Sousa’s 1896 composition, *Stars and Stripes Forever*. Click on the link below for a You-tube of the United States Marine Band playing *Stars and Stripes Forever*. I listened several times this week while writing the message and I think I’ll play it on the bus for our pilgrims on our next trip to the mountains of Gilboa.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a-7XWhyvIpE>

The power of music -- whether Congress in Washington D. C. on 9-11, the orchestra of Sarajevo in the midst of siege, or the *Song of the Bow* taught by David -- invites us to remember the place of sorrow as sacred and, because sacred, to seek sanctuary there. We normally think of sanctuary as a building, an architectural edifice dedicated to the sacred. I think, though, that in a truer sense sanctuary can be experienced anytime and anywhere, right in the midst of chaos.

I want now to tell you about one who sought sanctuary on a dismal, cold and rainy mid-winter Tuesday morning in February of 1998. That’s the day my wife taught me a lesson about the difference between sanctuary merely provided and sanctuary deeply experienced. I awoke early, as I did each Tuesday, having started at Wesley United Methodist Church in Pine Bluff a Tuesday morning Holy Communion service at 7:00. Each Tuesday, as was my routine, I would arrive at the church at 6:15 to prepare the elements and the beautiful instrumental music of hymns recorded for the people who came to receive Holy Communion and meditate in the quiet.

This Tuesday was different. Sherry, was to have major surgery the next day. Though weak, she had expressed a desire the night before to go to communion, something she couldn’t normally do because of her work schedule at the hospital. One of our cars was in the shop, a fact hardly worth remembering except that it contributed to this being such a dismal day for, you see, it fell to me to give her a ride and . . . well, she was running a bit late.

“*No, I’m late. I can’t wait for you,*” I tell her as I hustle out of the house unresponsive to her request for a few extra minutes. I was, you see, hurrying off to create sanctuary for others. That’s my job, right? “*See you later,*” I told her, turning away and overlooking the anguished look on her face. She’ll get over it, I thought. I would have waited, I imagine, for anybody else, any church member. Any good pastor would. It’s easier to be a good pastor than to be a good husband, easier to be a good-almost-anything than to be a good spouse, I suppose. Not waiting, I

drove off. *“She’ll understand,”* I thought, *“how busy I was, how important it is for me to be on time. After all, it’s my job. I’m a Sanctuary Engineer!”*

As we approach 8:00 and the end of the communion, I sit behind the pulpit in a beautiful, warm sanctuary, sheltered from the freezing drizzle outside, listening to soft instrumental hymns. O, the peace! The sanctuary door opens. Who could be coming in so late, I wonder? Walks in Sherry, soaking wet, beads of freezing water gelling at the tips of her hair. She had walked that mile or so from our house. Hormones going on that day, that dismal day! I, who had routinely sought to create a place of sanctuary for others, now realized she was bringing sanctuary with her, her own Holy Ground. On that cold walk her heart knew its own sanctuary, genuinely praying *De Profundis* while I, comfortable in my pastor’s perch, sat.

Most uncomfortable, I assure you, having to look in your wife’s eyes to offer her the bread and wine. *“Sherry, this is the Body of Christ, given for you,”* I say, knowing that minutes before I hadn’t been willing to offer her even a few minutes of my time. The sanctuary I had sought to create for others now seemed profoundly hollow, realizing that the sanctuary she brought with her was of purer construction, its walls mortared with fear, anxiety, and worry.

Next day, Sherry has surgery. You’d think she would get sick, having taken a frozen stroll the day before. No, instead, I get sick, as sick as I’ve ever been, even to this day. Nasty flu-like symptoms. I know what you’re thinking. *“Serves him right!”* I thought the same.

Fast forward to Sunday. Dismal days kept piling on. I had intended to get to work on the sermon earlier, but what with dragging myself into bed each night with chills, and slogging to the hospital each morning to relieve our daughters from the night shift . . . well, the sermon never developed beyond embryonic, completely stalled in a raw state of development. *“Oh well,”* I think as the hour of worship approaches, *“I’ve been pastor here for over two years, nearly three. The folks will have pity. They’ll understand my sermonic plight.”*

I walk into the sanctuary comforted in knowing that my congregation knows me, and they know what a virus of a week it’s been. I confess that I was hoping for a small crowd so as to confine my homiletical embarrassment to the faithful few. Wouldn’t you know it? More visitors for a single service than I think we had in my entire time in Pine Bluff. Where could they all have come from? What breeze of the Spirit might have played a trick on me by coaxing all these into our doors? My initial impulse is to escort them two blocks down 31st to the Nazarene church. *“You’ve come to seek a place of sanctuary. You will NOT find it here today! I should know! I’m the Sanctuary Engineer, and I’ve not been able to do my job. Please, friends, leave and come back next Sunday.”*

One guest is a mother of a childhood friend. *“Sieg,”* she said, *“I’ve been wanting to get away from my church and hear you preach ever since you came back to Pine Bluff.”* So I force a plastic smile and utter words of false enthusiasm, thinking to myself, *“Are you kidding me? After nearly three years you pick this Sunday, of all Sundays?”*

It gets worse. As I make my way to the front I see, sitting together, that not one but two district superintendents. My own D. S., Rev. Dr. Chester Jones and Rev. Bob Orr have chosen today, of

all Sundays, to visit unannounced. It's February, Bishop Huie's cabinet is meeting, and Rev. Orr from the Monticello District wishes to hear this new pastor, thinking of appointing him to one of his churches, Fordyce First Church. I greet our distinguished guests and think, "*Woe is me,*" as I duck into the choir room, beads of sweat pre-maturely popping out on my brow.

Armed with little, I tell a familiar bible story. Something about a kid who leaves home, makes awful mistakes and ends up in the pig slop. The Prodigal Son is the preacher's ticket out of a tight spot. There's a website nowadays, www.DesperatePreacher.com. Boy, I could've used it that day! So I say things like, "*Tie a yellow ribbon round the old oak tree,*" "*He ain't heavy he's my brother,*" things like that, staggering to the end of the sermon, craving for the benediction to rescue me. Service over, I stand at the back door ready to offer apology. "*I'm sorry about wasting your morning, but it's been a crazy week. Hey, it's hard to dance with the devil on your back.*"

As ready I stand with said apology, a young father takes my hand, as usual but, somehow, differently. Can that glimmer in the corners of his eyes be tears? "*Preacher, er, uh . . . well, I don't know. Thank you. I needed those words.*"

A little confused, a young lady pauses to whisper, "*Pastor, thank you. I've been thinking about my brother I lost last year, and that sermon meant everything to me. I'm beginning to cope better with my grief, and your words were like medicine.*"

What? I hadn't said a word about grief. Brothers, yes, but dysfunctional. "*How could she have been comforted by that? What possible sense of sanctuary could these have received from that scrambled collection of colloquialisms? How in the world could this dismal sermon on this dismal day from a malfunctioning Sanctuary Engineer actually have touched lives?*"

I feel like chasing them out the door. "*What was it you heard in this pitiful set of notes pecked out on my computer on the wobbling energy of a strong pot of coffee to pick me up in the weakened aftermath of this virus of a week? I don't get it.*" I had thought the message to be but a dead sermon emerging from a pastoral *De Profundis* moment. Yes, but in the Lord's hands, "*Dead Can Dance.*"

I think of Jairus, a ruler of the synagogue in Capernaum, who brings to Jesus his *De Profundis* cry of a father, pleading with him to heal his sick daughter. "*My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live.*" But they arrive too late, anguish filling the house where the girl has died. "*The child is not dead, but sleeping,*" Jesus says, and he enters the room. "*Talitha cumi,*" he says, "*Little girl, rise up.*" And the village learns *Dead Can Dance*. I hope you'll click on the link below and watch a four minute clip from Franco Zefferelli's, *Jesus of Nazareth*, this scene depicting the raising of the daughter of Jairus:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FiVEZq8iFEE>

I think also how John tells of Jesus being called to his friend Lazarus. Again, Jesus arrives late and Lazarus has died. Saying to his grieving sisters, “*I am the resurrection and I am life,*” he shouts at Four Days Dead, “*Lazarus, come forth!*” Walks Lazarus from the ruins of human decay, and the unwinding of the grave clothes binding him creates a dervish-like swirl proclaiming to all that Dead Can Dance.

Our closing hymn, *Lord of the Dance*, reminds us of the greatest *Dead Can Dance* moment of all -- the resurrection of Jesus:

*I danced on a Friday and the sky turned black;
it's hard to dance with the devil on your back;
they buried my body and they thought I'd gone,
but I am the dance and I still go on.*

*Dance, then, wherever you may be;
I am the Lord of the Dance, said he.
And I'll lead you all wherever you may be,
and I'll lead you all in the dance, said he.*

*They cut me down and I leapt up high,
I am the life that'll never, never, die;
I'll live in you if you'll live in me;
I am the Lord of the Dance, said he.*

*Dance, then, wherever you may be;
I am the Lord of the Dance, said he.
And I'll lead you all wherever you may be,
and I'll lead you all in the dance, said he.*