

## **SURVIVING THE UNIMAGINABLE**

### **RUTH 1: 19-22**

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If you know one thing about Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr, you probably know the way their story ended. Political rivals, Burr kills Hamilton in a duel. What you may not know - what I didn't know until I began listening to the soundtrack of "Hamilton" - is that Alexander Hamilton's 19-year-old son Philip was killed in a duel three years before his father, in the exact same spot.

In the musical, "Hamilton", there is a song that describes the grief journey of Philip's parents. It's called "It's Quiet Uptown" and while it is not the catchiest song in the musical, it is the most beautiful. An honest song about learning to live with the unimaginable.

In almost every life, at least once, there is something that happens that changes everything. You call it a nightmare, or a disaster, a living hell, or a shadow that falls over you. There's a whole alphabet of possibilities - addiction, bankruptcy, cancer, divorce, death, disease...I won't go through the whole alphabet. You know what they are. I look at my prayer list for this church family and I see the painful gamut. A child falsely accused. A child sent to prison. The loss of a job and a dream career. Betrayal and the loss of a marriage. House fire. An accident that left someone severely disabled. Mental illness.

It's no wonder that the question asked of me most frequently, by far, is this one: "Why does God allow these terrible things to happen?" And there are related questions:

“Does prayer even help?” “Why me? What did we do to deserve this? Am I being punished?”

My best answer to those questions is this true story.

Ten days after his son, Alex, was killed in a car accident, his car plunging into the Boston Harbor, the Reverend William Sloane Coffin delivered this sermon to his congregation at Riverside Church in New York City.

“As almost all of you know, a week ago last Monday night, driving in a terrible storm, my twenty-four-year-old son Alexander beat his father to the grave.

Among the healing flood of letters that followed his death was one carrying this wonderful quote from Hemingway:

"The world breaks everyone, then some become strong at the broken places."

When a person dies, 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 of Boston, when the front door opened and in came a nice-looking, middle-aged woman, carrying 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." Instantly I was up and in hot pursuit, swarming all over her. "I'll say you don't, lady!" I said.

For some reason, nothing so infuriates me as the incapacity of seemingly intelligent people to get it through their heads that God doesn't go around this world with his fingers on triggers, his fists around knives, his hands on steering wheels. God is dead set against all unnatural deaths. And Christ spent an inordinate amount of time

delivering people from paralysis, insanity, leprosy, and muteness. 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 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."

What causes bad things to happen to good people? Free will, for one. The laws of nature, for another. What it is NOT is God, trying to teach people lessons, or trying to punish people. We worship a God whose character is love, not a sadistic God.

We worship a God who suffers when we suffer, the way all parents suffer when their children are in pain; the way all friends hurt at the tears of another. We worship a God who knows what human pain and suffering is like.

Our scripture this morning is from the beginning of the book of Ruth. Naomi and her husband moved from the region near Bethlehem to Moab, because there was a severe famine in the land, and they needed to live where there was adequate food. While they were in Moab, they had two sons who both grew up and married there. But when we are introduced to Naomi, she is a widow and both of her sons have died. Surviving in the world as an unattached female was almost impossible in those days; Naomi knew she would have a better chance if she were back home among her relatives. She tried to get both her daughters-in-law to stay in Moab and find new husbands. One stayed, and one -- Ruth -- refused to let Naomi go on her own. They traveled together back to Bethlehem. Naomi is bitter and angry with God in the passage Tom read for us.

I'm not going to tell you the rest of the story, but I will tell you there's a happy ending...I chose this passage for this morning not because of the happy ending but because of Naomi's honest words, words some of us can relate to. The unimaginable happened to Naomi - she lost the three people she loved the most in the world. And like the Hamiltons, she survived...she not only survived but she went on to find joy and meaning in life.

Jerry Sittser is a minister and a professor at Whitworth College in Spokane, Washington. In 1991, the van he was driving was hit head-on by a drunk driver. His mother, wife, and four-year-old daughter were all killed. Sittser and his other three children survived. He has written several books about how his faith helped him recover after that devastating loss, and I recommend them highly. Early on, in his first year of grieving, he decided to face his pain head-on. He puts it this way: "I discovered that I had the power to choose the direction my life would head...to allow myself to be transformed by my suffering rather than to think I could somehow avoid it. Choice is...the key. We can run from the darkness, or we can enter into the darkness and face the pain of loss. We can indulge ourselves in self-pity, or we can empathize with others and embrace their pain as our own. We can nurse wounds of having been cheated in life, or we can be grateful and joyful, even though there seems to be little reason for it. We can return evil for evil, or we can overcome evil with good. It is this power to choose that adds dignity to our humanity and gives us the ability to transcend our circumstances, thus releasing us from living as mere victims. These choices are never easy. Though we can and must make them, we will make them more often than not after much agony and struggle."

When that event occurs in your life -- whatever the specific unimaginable event is -- that event that you would never ever choose -- in your pain and despair, you still have a choice. You can choose to look for a way to grow, emotionally and spiritually, in the midst of difficulty. Suffering can make life more meaningful.

There were prisoners in the Nazi death camps exercised their power to choose how they would respond to their unspeakably inhumane circumstances. They chose to display dignity, courage, and inner vitality. They found a way to transcend their suffering. Some chose to believe in God in spite of all of evidence to the contrary. They chose to expect a good tomorrow, though there was little promise of one. They chose to love, however hateful the environment in which they lived. In other words, they refused to yield ultimate power to their captors. They refused to give up their humanity, their spiritual freedom, their independence of mind. They found meaning in their suffering.

Nicholas Wolterstorff lost his adult son in a mountain-climbing accident and wrote a book called *Lament for a Son*, in which he wrote this: "In the valley of suffering, despair and bitterness are brewed. But there also character is made. The valley of suffering is the [place] of soul-making."

Tragedy breaks some people; it makes other people. It can make them better people, more loving, more appreciative of daily life and its joys.

"The supreme challenge to anyone facing catastrophic loss involves facing the darkness of the loss on the one hand, and learning to live with renewed vitality and gratitude on the other. This challenge is met when we learn to take the loss into

ourselves and to be enlarged by it, so that our capacity to live life well and to know God intimately increases. To escape the loss is far less healthy (and less realistic) than to grow from it. Loss can diminish us, but it can also expand us. It depends, once again, on the choices we make and the grace we receive. Loss can function as a catalyst to transform us. It can lead us to God...”, to a deeper awareness that God is not the one who causes tragedy but the one who mourns with us and comforts us. God’s steadfast presence with us reminds that there is more to life than what we see at this present moment, a life beyond this life that in God’s love will never end. And this life, this very day, is a gift not just to be endured or survived but to be enjoyed.

I know that this sermon does not come close to answering the most profound “why” questions nor does it ease the rawest or deepest pain. We will continue to ask “why” throughout our lifetimes, and none of us will live lives that don’t include suffering. But know this. In this room today are not only fellow worshipers, fellow VBS parents, but fellow questioners and sufferers. We are not alone. We experience God’s healing as we care for and reach out to one another. In this way, we can help one another survive each unimaginable event.

\*This sermon contains many quotes from the book, [A Grace Disguised](#), (How the Soul Grows Through Loss), by Gerald L. Sittser.