

# Memorial Sermon for Ben Larson

January 22, 2010

Luther College

Decorah, Iowa

*“God’s peace to us we pray . . .”*

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

In the novel *Night* Elie Wiesel recounts the story of his imprisonment in a concentration camp during the Second World War. At Auschwitz he looked death in the eyes. He saw the evil side of human life turned away from God. He wrestled with deep theological questions. Some of his questions still resonate in our minds whenever we face incomprehensible suffering. We search for answers; we yearn for words that will help us make sense of the brutal realities that unfold before us.

Elie Wiesel found his answer as he witnessed the execution of three prisoners. This is what he wrote:

The SS seemed more preoccupied, more disturbed than usual. To hang a young boy in front of thousands of spectators was no light matter. The head of the camp read the verdict. All eyes were on the child. He was lividly pale, almost calm, biting his lips. The gallows threw its shadow over him.

This time the Lagerkapo refused to act as executioner. Three SS replaced him.

The three victims mounted together onto the chairs.

The three necks were placed at the same moment within the nooses.

“Long live liberty!” cried the two adults.

But the child was silent.

“Where is God? Where is He?” someone behind me asked.

At a sign from the head of the camp, the three chairs tipped over.

Total silence throughout the camp. On the horizon, the sun was setting.

“Bare your heads!” yelled the head of the camp. His voice was raucous. We were weeping.

“Cover your heads!”

Then the march past began. The two adults were no longer alive. Their tongues hung swollen, blue-tinged. But the third rope was still moving; being so light, the child was still alive...

For more than half an hour he stayed there, struggling between life and death, dying in slow agony under our eyes. And we had to look him full in the face. He was still alive when I passed in front of him. His tongue was red, his eyes were not yet glazed.

Behind me, I heard the same man asking:

“Where is God now?”

And I heard a voice within me answer him:

“Where is He? Here He is—He is hanging here on this gallows...”

When confronted with situations that push the human experience to its limits, we turn to God as we try to find answers for that which is incomprehensible. Where is God? The question reveals in part the distorted understanding we have of the God whom we seek. We tend to think that we find God in the beauty of creation, in the happiness of human existence, or in the majesty of God's glory in eternity. But the gospel message is that we find God in those places where we think it is impossible for God to be. God was hanging in the gallows of Auschwitz. God was present in the captivity in Egypt. God is present in the periphery of human existence marked by poverty, exclusion, hunger, and violence. God is present under the rubble of collapsed buildings in Port Au Prince. Our God is the one who enfolds our broken reality and the pain of the world, making it God's own.

Kazo Kitamori, one of the early Lutheran theologians from Japan, wrote about the theology of the "pain of God." God-in-pain, he said, is the God who resolves our human pain by his own. Jesus, the crucified and risen Christ, is the Lord who heals our human wounds by his own. To follow this Lord of the Cross is to participate in the pain of God in the midst of the world.

It was this service to the God who suffers that led Ben, Renee, and Jon to Haiti to live and serve among and with God's children living in exclusion and marginalization, easing some of their physical and emotional pain, but most of all pointing to the new reality of life within God, as community is restored and new life is given. We all have sung to this new reality and understanding of God with our sisters and brothers from Nicaragua in the Creed of the Nicaraguan Mass: Vos sos el Dios de los pobres. El Dios humano y sencillo. El Dios que habita en la calle. El Dios del rostro curtido. (You are the God of the poor. The humble and simple God. The God that lives in the streets. The God whose face is covered with dirt.)

Ben loved music, and through the songs of the oppressed peoples of the world he discovered and proclaimed this God. These songs of hope and faith strengthened his commitment to God in the world, in solidarity and accompaniment to the people of Haiti. He became one with their pain, even as his God was one with their pain. He emptied himself in love and service for them. And he gave until there was nothing else to give but his own life. Oh, Ben knew this very well! In his senior talk here at this chapel this is what he said:

"The diversity in songs when the entire body of Christ is represented can bring a forgotten presence in worship. That presence is solidarity. I cannot think of anytime when I was severely oppressed, but singing the South African song *Bambalayla*, meaning, 'never give up,' which we have sung many times in chapel, reminds me that part of the body of Christ is living in a life style where the gospel gives them the hope and inspiration to never give up. These words "Never give up" are the only text in the whole song, but given the context and the story behind the music, there is a powerful idea of God presented. It is the idea that God is present in struggle. Global music like this reminds me of the suffering in the body along with the power of the gospel amidst suffering."

The power of the gospel is the knowledge of the nearness of God. This nearness of God is the source of our strength, hope, and joy. The Apostle Paul wrote to the congregation in Philippi to rejoice always. "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your request be made known to God. And the peace of

God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (Phil. 4:4-7).

As soon as we heard of the disaster in Haiti, we threw ourselves into the work of developing a strategy for relief and rehabilitation. In the midst of our work and prayers for the people of Haiti, we received the news about Ben, Renee, and Jon. We went to the Lord in prayer, bringing before him our children. It was a long night. Finally we were able to hear from Renee and Jon and kept text message contact for several hours. We were worried, and we all brought our prayers before God. Little did we know that God had answered our prayers.

Renee shared with us her last moments with Ben. As he lay trapped under the rubble, he began to sing. He sang hymns know to us and words that he made up as he sang. The last words that Renee heard from Ben were, “God’s peace to us we pray.” Right there our prayers were answered. God’ peace, the peace that surpasses all understanding, the peace that defies all brokenness, was given to Ben, and through his intercessory prayer, to the thousands of Haitians accompanying him under the rubbles of Port Au Prince.

One of our friends who teach at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, Vitor Westhelle, says that God’s grace breaks into our reality through fissures. Through the cracks or fissures of a collapsed building, God’s grace came to Ben, and God’s peace was given. When the horizons of life collapse or close, God’s grace and peace shines through the cracks to sustain and uphold us.

Using the *Magnificat*, Mary’s song, as the text for his senior talk, Ben continued to intertwine his passion for music and the gospel, God’s creating and redeeming word. He told the story of a bus tour of the Nordic Choir. “Once upon a J-break I was touring with the Nordic Choir. It was Sunday morning and there was no service. I was feeling a little empty because I had not missed a Sunday morning worship service since Nordic Tour the year before. So I took a page out of my parent’s book to hold a fun little worship service on the bus. I was putting together this worship service when I ran into a serious problem. What are we going to sing? After all music is second only to the word according to Luther, and this bus is filled with musicians. We couldn’t worship without song. So I tried to think of songs everyone could sing together. Wrong context for the doxology. Amazing Grace? Overdone. Jesus loves me? Too childish. How about simple camp songs? Hey, these are good musicians with standards. I wasn’t going to get this bus excited about singing camp songs written for kids. What was I going to do? I realized at this moment that our church has a huge problem, a huge void in our worship music. Without an LBW, WOV or PowerPoint technology we are at a loss for songs. And this is not acceptable. In our gospel text, when Mary found out that God was to become human and squeeze out of her and become a powerless infant that can’t even lift its own head, in a family at the bottom of the power chain she was ready to burst, in two different ways. She did not have time to find the organist and track down an LBW. She was going to sing right now, full throat, because she could do no other. That is when she sang the Magnificat. My situation on the bus may have been a little less dramatic, but the idea is the same. We needed spontaneous song.”

We have gathered to celebrate the life of Ben Larson, a life that was filled with God’s peace, a life that was driven by his desire to walk in the footsteps of the one he called Lord. The way he lived and the way he died show us that Ben was passionate about God’s people, particularly

those living at the margins of society. We are here celebrating the witness our children Ben, Renee, and Jon. They have taught us a lot about faith and courage. Someone has defined saints as ordinary people of extraordinary faith. They have shown us that.

Like Mary, without an organist or a hymnal, Ben burst into spontaneous song. Like Mary, he praised God for God's steadfast love. Ben spent his last minutes not complaining, not crying out in anger, but in deep prayer. He prayed for Renee and Jon, he prayed for April and Judd, he prayed for other victims of the earthquake, and he prayed for you and me. With a soft voice and a gentle whisper he offered his last words and prayer, *God's peace to us we pray*. And from Ben's witness, we draw the strength and courage make his prayer our prayer today and every day: *God's peace to us we pray*.