When a Child Dies

Cynthia Danals

Prayer

Loving God,
you inspire us with the lives of those we love.
You show us your strength through them.
We thank you for (Jared's) life among us.
We honor (his)memory with the words we speak of him.
We ask that you would console us in our grief.
Wrap your arms around us, we pray.
AMEN.

Graveside Prayer

Gracious God,
you have put us together when we have fallen apart.
You have helped us through marriage, and childbirth,
and many a family crisis.
You are wonderfully strong and loving.
Now we ask for your help again,
to soothe us
to heal our hearts
to restore our wholeness.
May your name be blessed by all you have helped.
AMEN.

Death comes unexpectedly to a member of your community—an accident, a suicide, or an illness. Family and friends need to sense God's compassion in the midst of their grief. Choosing the words, selecting the scripture, and consoling the family are the work and privilege of the pastor.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, told his circuit riders that they must be able to pray, preach, or die without notice. That is why he sent them out with the Holy Bible, a hymnal, and a book of his sermons. He wanted them to spread scriptural holiness throughout the land, using his sermons as templates for preaching the Word.

The goal of the funeral sermon is to preach God's mercy in the face of tragedy. Preaching difficult funerals is problematic because of time constraints and scarcity of resources. A late night with the family leads to an early morning in the study, followed by a late morning sermon, ready or not.

I offer the following sample of how one might speak about a ten-year-old boy.

Context

Jared, 10, was a member of your congregation. He was bright, articulate, and had a passion for building model cars. Whenever he would finish one, he'd bring it to church and gingerly place it in your hands, as if to ask your blessing. You

would marvel at it, examining it carefully, and tell him it was his best yet. He would take it back, beaming, and go home to add it to his growing collection.

His parents, Pamela and Jeremy, had supported him through a bout with cancer of the esophagus when Jared was three-and-a-half years old. Jared barely remembered the chemotherapy treatments, the hospital stays, and the trips to the emergency room. He did remember going to the Ford Museum in Dearborn, Michigan, to celebrate the five-year anniversary of his return to health.

Jared had a recurrence of this cancer when he was nine-and-a-half years old. This time, the treatment was more aggressive. The side effects were severe, including high fevers and splotchy rashes. One night, Jared's parents rushed him to the emergency room for a fever. Pamela called you and the prayer chain. By the time you arrived at the hospital, Jared had been admitted to the Pediatric Intensive Care Unit. He was covered with rash. He'd contracted a septic infection through the port that administered his chemotherapy. You watched as Pamela and Jeremy sat on either side of their son, alternately speaking reassurances and pressing toy cars into his hands.

Jared's hospitalization lasted three weeks. His parents were exhausted. To make matters worse, the expenses of the hospital stay had exceeded their family's insurance limit by several thousand dollars. Your church hosted three spaghetti suppers and a silent auction that offset most of the out-of-pocket costs. Late on a Saturday night, after his parents had left, Jared's heart stopped, and he could not be revived. Pamela called to ask you to preach at Jared's memorial service.

Sermon

Scripture: Luke 2:41-51

The Boy Jesus in the Temple

The Gospels hold only one account of our Lord Jesus Christ as a boy. It is a story of a time when the parents of Jesus suffered great distress. While on his family's annual trip to Jerusalem, he stayed behind to talk to the teachers at the temple. Mary and Joseph couldn't find him, even when they retraced their steps, even when they asked all of the relatives if they had seen their son. When they did find him three days later, Mary asked him a pointed question, which Jesus answered with another two questions. "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know I must be in my Father's house?"

Life with Jesus must have been unusual. He was Joseph's son, and he would work with Joseph. Jesus was conceived of the Holy Spirit, born to Mary, and was growing into his role as Son of God. He may have sung psalms louder than most children. He may have had a passion for helping people. He might have been an exceptionally good listener. We know that he knew the Scriptures well enough to discuss them with the teachers.

Jared was an exceptional child. As a preschooler, he would run to the front of the church when it came time for the Children's Moment. He'd plant himself at my feet, listen intently to my question, then shout out, "God!" or if that wasn't the answer, "Jesus!" or if that wasn't right, "Church!" He knew from experience that one of those three words would answer my question.

When he first began assembling model cars, he brought one for the Children's Moment one Sunday. It was a 1954 Oldsmobile which he'd painted a lustrous red. As he proudly displayed his handiwork, I asked him why he liked cars. He said, "Because they take us places." I wondered aloud how cars take us places, and he launched into an elaborate explanation of the internal combustion engine, which amazed all of us. So then I asked, what happens if something doesn't work? He stopped the discussion cold. "You fix it," he said.

Jared had had his share of being fixed. His fuel line had some corrosion which needed to be sanded off. Chemotherapy worked for his first experience with cancer of the esophagus. His reoccurrence was more severe. The treatment was no match for his illness. Jared succumbed to its side effects.

Like Jesus' parents, I'm sure Pamela and Jeremy were full of questions they never got to speak. They hungered for answers that never came. They sat by Jared's bed until the visiting hours were over every night, holding onto hope that became strained, then broke, leaving them awash in their tears.

Mary asked Jesus a question when she found him among the teachers at the temple. "Child, why have you treated us like this?" When our hearts are breaking, they may be filled with questions for God: "Why have you treated us like this? Didn't we pray hard enough? Did we live right? Didn't we put all our trust in you?"

There are no clear and simple answers to those questions when a child we love has died. But God has promised that no matter how deep the pain we feel, we cannot move beyond the bound of the sustaining love of God who raised Jesus Christ from the dead and who promises that nothing—not hardship or distress or peril—or even the death of this most precious child—can separate us from God's great love for us in Christ Jesus our Lord. Those of us who mourn today will not be left desolate, but we will be strengthened by God's Spirit and will know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge.

When I wanted to see a master at work, I'd go watch Jared put together a car. For his first few cars, his dad would help him by reading him the directions, finding the pieces, and gluing parts together. When he became more proficient, Jared didn't rely on the directions solely. He had enough experience to assemble a car without following the directions word for word. He would know intuitively which part to find, which parts needed to be painted before gluing, how things fit together. "It's simple," he said. "If you want to know how it's going to turn out, you just look at the design and work toward it." And that's the simplest definition of vision that I know.

Jared's parents have donated a selection of Jared's finished model cars, along with his last one that is unfinished, to the church as a temporary display. This will serve as a memory of a boy with a vision, hands with a purpose, and a heart for the Lord.

Jared rests today in the hands of a loving and merciful God, and we know that in life, in death, in life beyond death, God is with us. We are not alone. Thanks be to God.

May God bless you as you find the words to console his people and bring them gently to his heart. May his grace surround you in all that you do in his name.

Cynthia Danals is chaplain at Crossroads Hospice in Hudson, Ohio. She is an elder in the East Ohio Conference. Her book of prayers and sermons for difficult deaths is forthcoming from Abingdon Press.