

SERMON DELIVERED BY REVEREND WILLIAM L. DOLS, JR.,
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REVEREND DOLS: Our Heavenly Father, we pray that Thou will give us the courage and the patience and the wisdom to seek always after the truth, come whence it may and cost what it will. Amen.

For everything there is a season and a time for every matter under Heaven; a time to die, to pluck up what is planted, to break down, to weep, to cast away stones, to rend, a time for war.

As a Nation we have been living through such dying seasons. No matter where our allegiances or our investments, wherever our hearts may be, there are none of us who have not been touched by the plucking up of planted things, the breaking down, the rending and the warfare of these recent days.

There is a time for such things. What happens in such seasons is decided by people like ourselves, even some of us who are here, people who, seeking after the truth and praying for patience and courage and wisdom, make public the truth as we find it from wherever it may come and whatever the cost.

I would suggest to you that the issue of this day is not the guilt or innocence, though that will be debated through history. The business of tomorrow is not the rightness or the wrongness of the rending, but it is what we will now do with the pieces.

Each of us in our hearts, before God, must answer for the part we have played or declined to play, which is really the same thing, in the breaking down and the plucking up.

The question at this hour, before all of us, is where we will go from now.

Friday was one of those moving, dream-like, even bizarre kind of days. As a President flew high above the heartland of America, headed far away in the other direction, another nearby was following in his steps. It was almost mythic, archetypal, hearkening to the ancient symbol of the Old Testament and even before, that symbol of one lamb bast out into the darkness, bearing far away the sins of the many.

The greatest danger of this hour, I believe, is the temptation of the rending and casting away that it will allow us to make of Richard Nixon the scapegoat for us all, to believe that by sending him into the wilderness that he will bear the guilt of us all and that we will be free from blemish.

Scapegoats are the way people like us put the dark and shadowed side of ourselves on to the other and by destroying the condemned one, justify and cleanse ourselves.

Scapegoats serve a real purpose. That is, they help people avoid having to contend with self. They are a way of keeping us from being aware of the brokenness and owning up to the pieces that are ourselves. Unless we are willing to face up to the darkness that we are, and how each of us have colluded with each of them to bring our Nation to this crisis, we will have missed the point of the dying and will ensure that we remain in the grave.

There is also a season and a time to be born, to plant, to heal, to build up, to gather stones together, to seek, to keep, to sow, a time for peace.

Forty-two years ago one of the great dramas of our century began with the kidnapping of the 20-month old son of Charles Lindbergh. "I am going to write you this first afternoon," Anne Morrow Lindbergh was to write to her mother-in-law, "I am going to write and tell you all that I know, and some you may discover in the newspaper. I will write everything as I would like it told to me.

"At 7:30, Betty, the nurse, and I were putting the baby to bed. We closed and bolted all the shutters except one window where the shutters are warped and won't close. At 10:00 Betty went into the baby, shut the window first, then lit the electric stove, then turned to the bed. It was empty and the sides were still up. Evidently they got about one and one-half hours start. You know the rest."

Then there was for the Lindberghs the awful waiting. By March 18, another letter: "I realize nothing emotionally except when some other small immediate annoyance sets off the blaze. It is possible," she writes, "to live here and realize nothing about the baby. This is all so removed from him. Does that sound hard and unfeeling? I feel that I am willing to barter anything for my self-control."

On May 12 Anne Morrow Lindbergh wrote in her diary, "The baby's body was found in the woods on Hopewell Mountain-rose Road, killed by a blow on the head. I feel, strangely, a sense of peace; not peace, but an end to restlessness, a finality, as though I were sleeping in a grave."

In recalling the months and years that followed, Anne Morrow Lindbergh writes: "I do not believe that sheer suffering teaches. If suffering alone taught, all the world would be wise, since everyone suffers. To suffering must be added learning, understanding, patience, love, openness and a willingness to remain vulnerable."

Well, that is a story about a woman afflicted by a devastating kind of sadness and loss and how she survived it all by being willing to barter anything for self-control. And somehow, that is the way she stayed glued together and got done what needed doing. And when the end came and she was already hurt and fragile, she entered into a kind of sleeping in the grave that numbs and deadens feelings but allows people like us to keep going and not just stop.

But having survived the agony, she concludes, "If suffering alone taught, all the world would be wise. The real work of growing," Anne Morrow Lindbergh writes, "does not come only by the suffering and the agony, but by adding to the suffering the reality of mourning, the painfulness of understanding, the endless exercise of patience with self, not boarding up all the windows and doors, but letting them stay open and the willingness to remain vulnerable," which I think means hurttable, bruiseable and knowing that broken pieces are all we are.

In Eugene O'Neill's play, "Great God Brown," Brown says to little Margaret, "Everything is all right, a little paste, Margaret; life is imperfect, brothers; men have their faults, sisters; but with a few drops of glue much may be done, even broken hearts may be repaired to do yeoman's service." And he puts his finger to his lips and leans over to Margaret, "Shh," he says to her, "this is Daddy's bedtime secret for today: Man is born broken. He lives by mending."

The grace of God is glue. The Gospel of Jesus, as I know it, as I have experienced it in my life, as I have shared it deeply with some of you who are here today, is about how out of death can come new life, how out of weakness is born a courage and selfhood that is beyond strength; that it is in the graves of broken marriages and violated trusts and not-kept promises and failures that people and families, and I have to believe, nations, can be reborn.

The question is, what do we do with the pieces? Our choice is to remain in the grave, to gloat and glower and grimace, to stay in the tomb and make our diet skepticism, pessimism, remorse and a course of "I told you so's," or it is to hear the call that Lazarus once heard, to rise up, to return from the dying season, to awaken to a new day filled with other possibilities, to join together and turn to an agenda of hard needs in our land that have been waiting these many months to be addressed and to be met.

We can relish the brokenness and feed upon the death that is all around us, or we can gamble, taking the greatest risk of all, that risk which is about climbing out of the grave, rolling away the stone and picking up the broken pieces, with God's help and some honest talk with one another, in fear and trembling, to take the next step toward life.

Let us pray.

O Lord of Lazarus, Lord of the dead being called out of their graves, Lord of the tombs where the likes of us are made new, Lord of death, where life is born, bless the brokenness that is our Nation and that is each of us, and grant us, Lord, the grace to not feast upon the suffering, but to pick the pieces up again so that they might become that wholeness that comes to us only as it came to your Son, Jesus Christ, by first being broken. Amen.

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