

“Immeasurable Loss; Unspeakable Grief”

Psalm 147:3; Matthew 5:4; Romans 8:28

Preached By Dr. Robert F. Browning, Pastor
Smoke Rise Baptist Church
Stone Mountain, Georgia
January 18, 2004

Yesterday, our community said goodbye to two of its finest citizens, Coach Bill Venable and his son, Bill, Jr. Their funeral was in this sanctuary and was attended by over seventeen hundred people. Rarely have I seen an outpouring of love, support, pain and grief on that scale. Truly our loss is immeasurable and our grief unspeakable.

I'm sure all of you know the tragic events that led to their untimely deaths. The Venables had just returned home Tuesday night from a high school wrestling match when an armed burglar entered their home. A struggle ensued and the burglar killed Coach Venable and his son. Mrs. Venable called the police and when they arrived, they found the suspect hiding in the woods behind the house and killed him in an exchange of gunfire.

Our young people are in shock. Bill was a senior at Tucker High School and member of Smoke Rise. His parents were members of a neighboring church, but Bill made his profession of faith here three years ago and was baptized. What an asset he was to our youth group and church. He had a gentle spirit, contagious smile and engaging personality. Bill never met a stranger or a group he did not enjoy. He will be missed more than words can express.

I appreciate the love and support that Smoke Rise members poured out upon this family. Our staff, deacons and youth Sunday School teachers have led the way. Especially do I commend Ernie and Andy for the way they ministered to our young people at this critical time. God has used them to help bind some big wounds.

As our grief lingers and spills over into this worship service, I would like to address the questions, “Is there a word from the Lord at a time like this? Does the Bible speak to us about such things?” I believe so and would like to point out what it says.

To begin, the Bible tells us that evil is real. As surely as there is good in the world, there is also bad. As a matter of fact, one of the first stories in the Bible focuses upon violence. Genesis 4:1-16 tells us about Cain killing his brother Abel. Violence, even murder, is not new.

Have you seen the movie *Cold Mountain*? It is based on a novel by Charles Frazier. In the waning days of the Civil War, a wounded soldier embarks on a perilous journey back home to Cold Mountain, North Carolina to reunite with his sweetheart. On his pilgrimage, he comes upon a wide variety of opponents and allies.

For me, the love story was almost overshadowed by the violence. I walked away from the movie startled by the depiction and amount of violence. One thing is for sure. You cannot see this movie and doubt the reality of evil. Man's inhumanity to man is graphically portrayed.

This leads to the inevitable question. Why is there evil in a world created by a loving God? I have been asked this question several times this week. Without sounding too simplistic, I believe it is because God created man with the freedom to make choices. He then gave man a spirit capable of receiving wisdom and guidance from Him. It was God's hope that man would seek and do His will whenever he had a decision to make because He would be faithful to guide His children down the right path.

Coach Venable and his son, Bill, certainly let God lead them. Coach Venable was more than a teacher, but a friend, role model and mentor for his students. Bill was the image of his closest friend, his dad. Even at the age of seventeen, Bill was also a role model and mentor for his friends. How impressed I was with Coach Venable's son Steve that spoke at the funeral when he said, “Many families are lucky to have a father that is a hero. Many families are lucky to have a brother that is a hero. Our family was fortunate to have both!”

However, God's influence is not the only one pulling on man. There is an evil influence in this world that tempts everyone to ignore God's will and choose bad over good. Regrettably, some choose the path of evil. **And when they do, the Bible tells us that the consequences are devastating.**

We saw that yesterday at the funeral. We feel it today and this feeling will be with us a long time.

Repeatedly, the Bible teaches us that sin kills. It always brings death and destruction. Listen to James 1:13-15.

“When tempted, no one should say, ‘God is tempting me.’ For God cannot be tempted of evil nor does He tempt anyone; but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full grown, gives birth to death.”

We saw the fulfillment of this scripture in the high school shootings in Jonesboro, Arkansas, West Paducah, Kentucky, Pearl, Mississippi, Springfield, Oregon, and Littleton, Colorado. We saw it in Oklahoma City, Bosnia and Kosovo. We see it daily in Iraq. We saw it in our own neighborhood Tuesday night. Surely, we have seen enough to understand.

The Bible tells us something else that we must not ignore. God is aware of our plight and wants to help us. How can He help us? There are many ways and I mention two.

He uses His influence to persuade people to do good and not evil. His goal is to help people see and weigh the consequences of their actions. But He must do more than enlighten them. He must also give them a willing heart and a disciplined spirit. Turning people toward good requires more than an awareness of a choice. It demands a change of heart. Love must conquer jealousy, greed, hatred and selfishness. Only God can change a heart and He is committed to changing every person's.

Our world is full of examples where He has succeeded. This sanctuary is filled today with people that chose good over evil last week because of God's influence in their lives. These deeds of compassion did not make the headlines like this despicable act of violence, but rest assured that good far outweighed evil last week.

God also helps us by healing wounds caused by those that will not listen to Him. I could read hundreds of verses that would assure us of this fact. One of my favorites is Psalm 147: 3. “He heals the broken hearted and binds up their wounds.” Another is Matthew 5: 4. “Blessed are they that mourn, for they will be comforted.” Both passages attest to God's desire and ability to lighten the burdens of His children.

Years ago I read the beautiful quote, “One day God will wipe away all tears from their eyes, but until that day, He cries with us.” I believe this to be true. No one shed more tears Tuesday night than God. No one's heart ached more.

He does more than empathize with His hurting children, though. He walks with them through the valley of the shadow of death and offers strength, courage, comfort, and hope in times of need. What a difference His healing Spirit makes. Where would we be without Him?

I have always appreciated the promise of Romans 8:28. “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose.” This verse tells me that not everything that happens is good or God's intentional will, but that He can take the most devastating tragedy and make good things come from it. He is not a helpless victim as we are. Instead, He will have the final word in any tragedy and it will be good. What a difference His loving Spirit makes. Where would we be without it?

At the funeral yesterday, Mr. Scott Butler, the principal at Tucker High School and a deacon here, shared a fitting tribute to Coach Venable and his son. His words moved and touched all of us. I conclude this sermon with a quote from him. "In our world, right doesn't always win. In God's world, though, right will always prevail." Thanks, Scott, for reminding us of this during a week of immeasurable loss and unspeakable grief.