

When There's Nothing Left to Say
by Marthame and Elizabeth Sanders

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Weddings and funerals bring headaches for pastors. Every family goes through them, bringing along (and often airing) their emotional baggage. Pastors must simultaneously minister to and work with emotionally-charged families to create a worship service. A difference between the two is that no one expects a eulogy at a wedding. Families may expect all kinds of things (“Wind Beneath My Wings” as a congregational hymn, taking “that depressing cross” out of the sanctuary), but no one expects the pastor to lie about a family member.

Textbook eulogies run along these lines: “John was a good man, a kind man, a gentle man. (Imagining the preacher’s drone helps.) We will always remember him as a loving father, a doting husband, a faithful son.” The truth perhaps, but more likely kernels of truth strung together with little lies; the person who actually walked on water comes by rarely. Such hagiography is unlikely to be heard by, or console, the alienated son, first wife, or estranged friend. To avoid this, some pastors strip it down to a bare-bones biographical sketch. The reason they are there, after all, is to lead a service that worships the divine, not the deceased. The emotional details can be filled in by the admiring and the estranged alike.

Others choose another way, one that ventures to find something about the person that reflects the *imago dei*, the image of God, the divine spark—a moment in John’s life that tells of a truth beyond him, whether or not he himself was capable of reaching it. Picking up on John’s love of hiking and bird watching, the eulogy can point the listener toward the splendor of creation and renewed awe for its Creator. A faithful eulogy can lead beyond the example of the deceased toward divine truth and grace.

Here in Israel and the Occupied Territories, the divine seems extravagantly absent. In the past seventeen months, 300 Israelis have been killed by Palestinians. For a population of five million, that’s the equivalent of a World Trade Center attack five times over. Eleven hundred Palestinians have been killed by Israelis—that’s thirty-seven WTCs. A lot of eulogies, but very little truth or grace.

“The Israelis shoot us with their helicopters and F-16s and tanks and missiles, but we Palestinians don’t have anything. We only have stones.” “The Israeli military actions are strictly in self-defense. We never take the offensive but act only in response to terror.” Crumbs of truth, perhaps, but obscured by not-so-little lies. The whole world sees nightly images of the latest Palestinian attacks, sometimes aimed at soldiers, sometimes not, killing and maiming civilian men, women, and children. Here, we also get nearly hourly reports about victims of the Israeli army—police officers and fighters, children in their classrooms, doctors in their ambulances, pregnant women on their way to the hospital.

These people's deaths become justification for more killing, fueling the bloody cycle of revenge. The violent response and re-response becomes a living eulogy that points away from mercy and peace, toward hatred and pain. It's as if the pastor said, "John's life stood for vengeance and blood-letting." We might as well dance on his grave.

However, amid the bloodshed and lies we continue to find that spark, that bold soul willing to try to display grace and truth. More than 300 Israeli reservists have refused to serve in the West Bank and Gaza, citing not only the dangers of such service but its illegality and immorality. Thousands of peace activists gathered in Jerusalem just hours after yet another suicide attack. In contrast to Ariel Sharon's commitment to "hit the Palestinians harder," these Israelis proclaimed that enough is enough—"get out of the Territories and back to ourselves," they cried. Internationals and Palestinians bravely continue to join in non-violent actions throughout the West Bank and Gaza, staying with families under siege, removing the roadblocks that strangle Palestinian villages, standing in the way of bulldozers poised to knock down homes, all in the face of tear gas, arrests, and live ammunition.

These testimonies are a living eulogy that defies the cold logic of revenge. It is here that we see the *imago dei*, a spark of hope so desperately needed in this dark place. We pray that it is these words and actions of grace and truth that will prevail. Then together we can finally bury this violent nonsense once and for all.

Salaam al-Masihih (peace of Christ),
Elizabeth and Marthame