

Of This I Am Sure

by Ken Sehested

Editor's note: Below are excerpts from words offered by Ken Sehested at Samuel Adam's interment on Saturday, August 14, 2004 in Louisville, Kentucky. Sam, eighteen, and his girlfriend, Jenny, were killed in an automobile accident.

Ann Lamott says there are only two kinds of prayers:

Thank you, thank you, thank you
and

Help me, help me, help me.
I think she's right.

If I close my eyes and concentrate I can still smell the salty ocean breeze of Sunset Beach where for several years running I helped Laura and Sam [Adams] and Free and Aaron [Williams] and Jessica and Alayna [Sehested] build sandcastles at the edge of the surf.

*Thank you, thank you,
thank you.*

And can it
already be nearly

two years ago that Laura [Sam's sister] and Tyler invited us to their Rocky Mountain wedding banquet, where Nancy [Sehested] guided these young lovers through their matrimonial vows? And where Sam performed an original composition in their honor? And where a host of us pronounced a hearty "AMEN" to the promises of constancy and fidelity said that day—promises to be honored through all the thick and thin of life, through both the parties and the perils that mark every companionship.

On some special occasions you say both prayers:
Thank you, thank you, thank you!

and
Help me, help me, help me!

It was in his first letter to the early Christian community in Corinth that the Great Apostle spoke these memorable words:

"Oh death, where is thy victory? Oh death, where is thy sting?"

Grammatically these are questions; but rhetorically they are more like bold dares spoken forcefully, even defiantly in the face of death. If some preschooler were to accurately translate this dare it would come out something like:

Na-nana-nana-na, you can't get me! Such fierce resolve in the face of ultimate threat!

These glorious lines have been sources of comfort to most of us at one time or another.

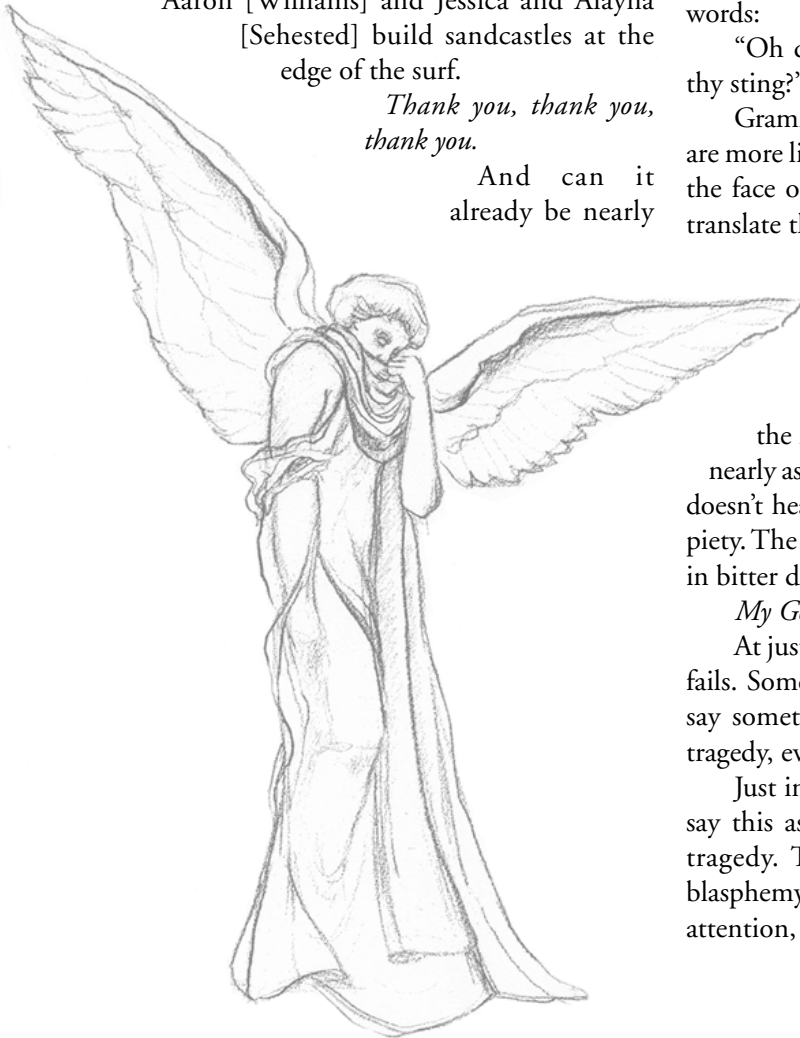
But not always. When the open grave contains the remains of a dearly-beloved, our confidence isn't nearly as sure. And death's stinging puncture on our hearts doesn't heal with the pronouncement of this or any other piety. The sting hurts . . . still hurts . . . and our souls shrivel in bitter disbelief.

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

At just about every burial occasion I've been to, it never fails. Some well-meaning dufuss will publicly or privately say something like: "Well, God has his purpose in this tragedy, even though we don't understand it."

Just in case any of you are unsure at this point, let me say this as bluntly as possible: God had no part in this tragedy. To suggest otherwise is not only cruel but a blasphemy. God is not a terrorist who, in order to get our attention, resorts to murdering the people we love.

continued



Of this I am as sure as the day is long and the night is dark.

Of this I am sure: God's heart has been ripped as deeply as have those of both Jenny's and Sam's families and friends.

Of this I am sure: Every tear shed in recent weeks has stained the face of Heaven.

Of this I am sure: That God is more taken with the agony of the earth than with the ecstasy of heaven.

But after this, my assurances come to an end. There is nothing I can say to make sense of this tragedy or relieve its agony. If I could have banished the sting by walking on my knees from Asheville to Louisville, I would have. The very earth itself howls in protest against having to swallow these brilliant children too soon. It is frightening to think that our very best sandcastles are not enough to protect our young ones.

Yet there is one exception to the end of all assurances. And it is this: God takes great delight in loving us.

It is this: That the terrors of breathly life will one day come to an end.

It is this: One day the only tears we will know will be those which come from convulsions of sidesplitting laughter.

It is this: One day the enmity between lion and lamb will cease; the poor will be raised from the dust; the boots of every trampling warrior will be tossed in the fire; the shamed will be ushered to a seat of honor; the meek will

inherit the earth; and we shall all dance—arm and arm with Sam and Jenny—on the grave of death itself.

Thank you, thank you, thank you.

Some day you will again be able to say thank you. The day will come when once again praise will issue from your lips; when doxology will erupt from your lungs; when hope will arise with the sun and restful sleep arrive with the moon. Once again your dry bones will live, your grief will be melted with mercy, the tide of tears will recede.

For now, it is enough to pray

help me, help me, help me.

*“O Joy that seekest me through pain
I cannot close my heart to thee
I trace the rainbow through the rain
and feel the promise is not vain
that morn shall tearless be.”*

Ken Sebested is the founding director of the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America and now works with the Circle of Mercy faith community in Asheville, North Carolina—as well as other organizing and peacemaking activities. This sermon was printed in Baptist Peacemaker, Volume 24 Number 3, Fall 2004 as part of a tribute to Samuel Adams. The art, “Prague Angel,” is by Sally Lynn Askins, a professor of theatre design at Baylor University.