

Funeral Message for Aaron Johanson

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In the Old Testament book of the prophet Isaiah, chapter 61, God offers the world an amazing promise: that He will come . . .

*“to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives
and release from darkness for the prisoners,
to proclaim the year of the LORD’S favor
to comfort all who mourn,
and provide for those who grieve in Zion—
to bestow on them a crown of beauty
instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness
instead of mourning,
and a garment of praise
instead of a spirit of despair.”*

This has been a week that has put that promise to the test! For all of us gathered here today, these are the words that have described our lives for the past few days: *“brokenhearted, darkness, mourning, grief, despair.”* The sudden, unexpected and shocking death of Aaron Johanson has thrown the normal order of our lives into disarray and chaos. We have experienced an enormous loss.

I’ve been a pastor for thirteen years and have ministered in many difficult situations before, but this one is, without a doubt, the worst I’ve ever experienced. And I suspect that most of you would say the same. What we have experienced this week has not just been grief or even terrible grief, but paralyzing grief.

Our hearts are broken—broken by our own sense of loss—and broken even more when we see you John, Lisa, Kyle, and Sonja. We are here today—hundreds and hundreds of us, not simply because we love Aaron, but also because we want you to know that you are not alone. We are grieving with you and praying for you and we are hoping that our presence that you can see today will be a symbol to you of the presence of Almighty God, your Heavenly Father who, though you can’t see Him, is just as real and just as present. Jesus has promised you, *“I am with you always.”*

The question that is on all our hearts and minds is the exasperating question, “Why?” Why did this happen? And why to Aaron Johanson of all people? Why would someone who was so gifted and so joyful and so deeply, deeply loved by so many, take his own life?

And the answer to that question is that there is no answer—at least not one that we will ever know this side of heaven. Only God knows why. We all are, in many ways, in the same position as Martha was, many years ago, when she stood at the grave of her brother, Lazarus. When Jesus arrived, she said, *“Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”* There’s anger in the statement, I think. There’s frustration and bitterness in those words. Martha and Lazarus were not strangers to Jesus! They were among his closest and dearest friends. It may not have a question mark at the end of the sentence, but that’s exactly what it is. It’s the “why?” question, in just a slightly different form.

And what strikes me most about it is that Jesus never answers it. Instead, He gives a promise—a truly amazing promise—*“Your brother will rise again.”* And when Martha didn’t quite get it, He gave her another, even more amazing promise. He said, *“I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me, will never die.”*

And it appears, if you read the whole story, that Martha found peace in the sure and certain promise of Jesus. She found peace and hope again—not by getting the “why?” question answered—even though she desperately wanted it answered—but by letting go of the “why?” question and entrusting it to Jesus and instead focusing on the promises. And friends, if we’re going to find hope and peace and strength after Aaron’s tragic death, that’s exactly what we must do too.

What has Jesus promised?

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus promised that, *“He who believes and is baptized will be saved.”* And please notice, that that promise is not qualified in any way. God’s promises are absolute. Aaron believed and Aaron was baptized and therefore, Aaron, we know, has been saved. And no choice he made on Monday afternoon—no matter how wrong or misguided it was—can change that.

Jesus has promised us further that if we will trust in His death and resurrection, then we can be assured that a great reunion with Aaron awaits us in heaven someday. In the New Testament book of First Thessalonians, the Bible speaks to other Christians who were experiencing the death of people they loved. And it gives these words of promise:

“Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. ¹⁴We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. ¹⁵According to the Lord’s own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁶For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. ¹⁸Therefore encourage each other with these words.”

And Jesus further promises us that as we wait for that great reunion, He will be with us each day.

“The eternal God is your refuge and underneath are the everlasting arms,” says Deuteronomy.

“Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength,” says Isaiah.

“Because of the Lord’s great love, we are not consumed,” says Lamentations.

“Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus,” says Romans.

“I will never leave you. I will never forsake you,” Jesus says Hebrews.

And on and on the promises go. And because all those promises are true and sure and certain, we can find hope again. We can find peace again. We can find rest for our souls again. We may not have these things fully or perfectly yet. In fact, this week we may feel like we hardly have them at all, but they will surely come, if we trust the promises of Christ, because God never breaks a promise.

But more than that, because all those promises are true and sure and certain, it also means that we should not and we cannot and we will not allow the last minute of Aaron’s life to define all 18 years of his precious life here on earth.

In the days and months and years to come, I will not remember Aaron for anything that happened this week. I will remember him, as John and Lisa labeled him this week, as the guy who “lived life out loud.” I will remember him as the guy who, when I first met him, had hair that was longer than my wife’s, then shaved himself nearly bald, and somewhere in between had a Mohawk too!

I will remember him as an amazingly gifted drummer, who, even at the age of 16, was one of the most talented musicians in our church. I will remember him leading us in worship with great passion and energy.

I will remember him as a member of our church’s many mission trips, who, on the videos we would make, would be prone to say that he went on the trip because his two best friends were going—and then he would flex and kiss his biceps. 😊

Those are the kind of things we will remember about Aaron! His joy, his laugh, his creative spirit, his gifts, his faith in Jesus. We will remember those things, because we will, first and foremost, remember the promises of Christ that will never, ever fail us.

Let’s tell God that we remember His promises, as we sing our next song, “You Are My All In All.” I’ve instructed our band to play the way Aaron would have played it—FAST and LOUD!

Let’s worship the Lord together. . .