

HE DID WHAT?

"What?" we asked, when told that Nathan had passed from this life on Thursday night. The news just didn't register. When told that Nathan had died from a self-inflicted wound, that he had shot himself in the chest, we asked in disbelief, "He did what?" We were shocked. We simply didn't expect it; it didn't make sense. He seemed to be having a good year at school. He had just celebrated his sixteenth birthday; he was looking forward to getting his driver's license. Though he had his gloomy, down times, it didn't seem all that strange for a teenager to have mood swings.

While we know that suicides occur, we just assume that they occur out there, in lives of people that we don't know all that well. This isn't supposed to happen in a Christian high school; this isn't supposed to happen in a Christian family; this simply isn't supposed to happen, period. When it actually does happen, and we find out that we are not immune, we're shocked. "He did what?"

We really shouldn't be shocked. We wouldn't be shocked if we listened carefully to what God says in his Word. This is what God says about all people, Nathan included, *"Every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood."* Nathan was, like King David, *"sinful at birth; sinful from the time my mother conceived me."* There was nothing good in Nathan by nature. He was sinful. He was thoroughly corrupt. What should we expect someone thoroughly corrupt on his own to do? Sin. That's what sinners do. They reveal the thoughts and attitudes of their heart by acts of rebellion against God's holy law.

Those who are born in sin view the world only through the lens of the question, "What do I want to do?" Nathan's sinful nature focused on self. It's not particularly shocking that someone who was by nature obsessed with doing what he wanted to do would try to take his own life.

Remember, too, where Nathan lived. I don't mean Centennial or Littleton or Colorado. He lived in this unbelieving world that insists that human beings are free to take their own life. Going out on your own terms, at your own time, to free yourself from pain and difficulty, is, according to the world, the right of everyone. Though the Lord tells us not to listen to the world, it's hard to ignore when they are jamming

their opinions down our throats. It's not particularly shocking that a person with a sinful nature would listen to the world and attempt to take his own life.

What about our arch-enemy? St. Peter tells us that *"Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour."* Satan will not content himself with the ruin of God's creation. He so hates God that he wants to destroy every one of God's people. The devil is no weak, witless enemy. The Liar knows how to spin a yarn. He knows how to hook people with his lies. He deceived Nathan into believing the lie that suicide would be a courageous thing to do, that only a young man with great strength could take his own life. He deceived Nathan into believing the lie that the world would be a better place without him. Considering that the devil deceived perfect Adam and Eve, it's hardly shocking that he deceived Nathan.

When we listen to what God says in his Word about the sinfulness of our nature, the power of the world's temptations, and the deceit of the devil, it's not particularly shocking to hear what Nathan did. In some respects, then, we really have no reason to ask, "He did what?"

But today we most certainly do have reason to ask that question. It's the question that we want to ask for years to come, not in sorrow, but in wonder; not in sadness, but in joy. It's a question we want to ask, not about Nathan, but about God and what God did last Thursday: "He did what?"

Think of what God did. Nathan had directly disobeyed God's command not to murder. He had disregarded the Lord's rule that "our times are in the Lord's hands." He had been selfish and self-centered. And what did the Lord do in response to this rebellion? Hand him over to Satan? Concede that the roaring lion had won that victory? Oh, no. God miraculously intervened. He mercifully granted Nathan sincere sorrow over that sin. He compassionately allowed Nathan time to confess his sin. He graciously worked faith in Nathan's heart to believe that his sin had been forgiven. The Lord gave Pastor the privilege of saying to his son one last time, "Jesus loves you. Jesus forgives you." Though Nathan's death was a result of his sin, the Lord used that sin for the greatest good. He turned evil into

blessing as he used Nathan's death to deliver Nathan to his side. He used Nathan's confession to comfort and encourage all those who survive that Nathan will live with the Lord forever. And we say, with jaws dropped, "God did what?" We're shocked at God's grace and awed by his mercy.

Rightly so. There is an explanation for Nathan's action. He was a sinner. He lived in a world that glorifies suicide. He was tempted by the ultimate deceiver. But there is no explanation for the action that God took last Thursday evening. God had nothing to gain by what he did. He who created the heavens and the earth needs no one and nothing to be complete. The Lord would have lived in joy forever with or without Nathan. That the Lord would go to such extremes in this situation is shocking. We love because of what we see in others. The Lord chooses to love for no reason other than that he is love, because he could never find in sinners a reason to love.

That the Lord would directly intervene for Nathan's benefit once would be enough to shock us and lead us to raise our voices to the Lord in praise. But this wasn't even close to being the first time the Lord intervened in Nathan's life. On April 26, 1992, Pastor and Connie brought Nathan to God's house, knowing what they had done. They had passed along their sin to their son. They had placed him under God's condemnation. They brought Nathan to the font that day, knowing that the holy God hates sin and hates sinners. Yet they came because they knew God's mercy, that he had intervened in the lives of others through the Sacrament of Holy Baptism. God did intervene.

The intervention is explained in Galatians 2:20: "*I have been crucified with Christ.*" That's what the Lord does in the water of baptism. He crucifies. He puts to death. That's what he did for Nathan, putting the Old Adam under the water and ending its reign. Nathan did nothing; God did everything. God crucified that old sinful self that separated Nathan from the Lord. He created peace between himself and Nathan. Talk about an unlikely relationship – that would be it. The Lord and Nathan. Nathan had nothing to offer to the Lord. The Lord had no need for Nathan. Yet the Lord amazingly, shockingly, entered into that relationship by taking care of the sin that would have led Nathan into eternal suffering.

The Spirit of God, through the word connected with the water of Baptism, did even more for Nathan than take away his sin. The Apostle says, "*I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.*" The Lord Jesus, the one who obeyed God's law perfectly, the one who never for a

moment doubted God's love, the one who never hurt another, the one who never hurt himself, the one with whom the Father was well-pleased – that Jesus united himself to Nathan. He married Nathan. He said, "What do you have to bring to this relationship, Nathan? Sin? I'll take that." Jesus willingly took upon himself the blame for every last one of Nathan's sins. We can't stand to be blamed for something we hadn't done; the Lord Jesus took the blame for every sin he had not committed. Jesus said, "I have something I want to give you – my righteousness." Jesus was Nathan's righteousness, not just on those days when Nathan lived up to "his end of the deal," but every day. The Lord provided the righteousness that Nathan could never have mustered, no matter how diligently he would have labored. By that righteousness, Nathan lives.

On April 26, 1992, through the washing of rebirth and renewal, the Lord made a promise to Nathan. He promised to be faithful to Nathan, never to leave or forsake him. He promised not to take his Holy Spirit away or to take away the righteousness that he had freely given. In essence, the Lord promised that he would continually intervene in Nathan's life. It was on the basis of the Lord's continual intervention that the Apostle Paul said, "*The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God.*"

So it was with Nathan. He lived by faith in the Son of God. That, too, is shocking! Though born of believing parents, Nathan did not enter the world believing. In fact, Nathan could not come to faith on his own because he was born dead spiritually. What Nathan couldn't do, the Lord could. And did. He brought Nathan to believe that Jesus was the Son of God. He brought Nathan to trust that Jesus was the Way, the Truth, and the Life, the One who had prepared a place for him by his death and resurrection. He confirmed Nathan in the faith through the Word he heard from his father and mother, from his brothers and sister, from his peers, from his teachers at Lord of Life and Rocky Mountain Lutheran High School.

The result of the Lord's continual intervention in Nathan's life? Nathan regularly confessed his faith in Jesus in school and at home, with his friends and his family. The devil's lies and the world's doubts did not take over his heart. He still confessed Jesus as his Righteousness, the only way to stand before the holy God. By that Spirit-given faith, he had life with God. We can only say with awe and amazement, "The Lord preserved him in faith."

Then how, if the Lord promised to preserve him, could this happen? Where was God when Nathan

was thinking about such a horrible thing as ending his life? He was where he had been since April 26, 1992. He was working in Nathan's heart. Sadly, the sinful flesh has the horrible power to stand toe-to-toe with God and demand to do what he wants to do. The Lord should have said, "I will not stand for this rebellion." The Lord could have taken his Spirit away. But instead his Spirit remained.

Why didn't the Lord turn and run when Nathan turned the gun toward himself? Because the Lord's relationship with Nathan had never been based on who Nathan was or how he conducted himself. It was never on the basis of Nathan's righteousness, but rather on the righteousness of the Lord Jesus. As Paul said, *"I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."* Paul didn't say, "I live by faith in the Son of God, for whom I give myself up and to whom I offer my service." There was no certainty to be found in himself, for the Apostle knew the sinfulness of his nature and the sins of his life. The only way to be righteous in God's sight was through faith in the Lord Jesus who loved him.

Nathan was righteous in Christ. That's why we know that Nathan lives, in spite of his sin. His body does not live, but his soul does. God is faithful.

The same Lord Jesus who loved Nathan and gave himself up for him loves you who are left behind. His love for you is not like your love for him – somewhat up and down and fickle. His love is constant. It is pure. He loves you in spite of your sin and weakness and fear. Rest in that love. Because he loves you, he will do as he promises. He will strengthen you and uphold you. He will see you through your grief; he will be with you every step of the way. What Jesus said to his disciples in John 14, he says to you, *"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid."*

One of the sad consequences of a suicide is that the survivors are left thinking about what they failed to do. "If only I would have done this and that," we think, "this might never have happened." You have to know that the Liar wants you to do that. He wants you to find all of your weaknesses and flaws. He wants you to fixate on your failures. He wants you to cite chapter and verse of your sin. He wants you to beat yourself up. Don't give him the pleasure! Listen instead to what the Lord says to you in these verses. Your righteousness comes not from what you did for Nathan; nor is your righteousness ruined by what you have done or failed to do for Nathan or anyone else.

You are righteous by faith in Christ. Christ lives in you and has united himself with you. You are righteous. The devil can argue all he wants about that assertion, but it's the assertion of the One who cannot and will not lie. Jesus rose from the dead as proof of that declaration. You do not, and will not, live by your feelings of guilt. You do not, and will not, live by your promise to do more and better in the future. You live by faith in the Son of God who loved you and gave himself for you.

In the days and weeks to come, as you call to mind Nathan's life and death, recall with thanksgiving and joy the Lord's grace to Nathan. The Lord reached out to Nathan in Baptism to put his sinful self to death. He granted Nathan the righteousness of Christ, the only righteousness that avails before the Judge of all mankind. Through Word and Sacrament the Lord remained with Nathan, strengthening and preserving him in faith. And even when Nathan sinned, the Lord did not pack his bags and leave. He stayed, for Nathan's righteousness came from Christ, not from himself. The Lord even preserved his life to allow him to confess, and more importantly, to hear the word of forgiveness. Shocked by the Lord's amazing grace, we say in wonder and joy, "God did what?" May the name of the Lord be praised, even today! Especially today!