

“David & the Death of Absalom”  
 delivered Sunday, August 2, 2009  
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 2 Sam. 18:4-15, 24-33

*Introduction of the Scripture*

This morning we journey much further down the road in this family saga of the great King David. Next week, we will end this sermon series on a high note with David dancing wildly in the streets as the Ark of the Covenant is carried into Jerusalem. But this morning, the text that is before us is a picture of a King broken down -- by an internal family matter that has resulted in a Civil War within the Kingdom. David’s beloved son Absalom has mounted a revolt against his father’s kingship. As we prepare to hear this chapter in the ongoing narrative about King David, let us look to God in prayer. Holy God, we give you thanks for these stories of scripture that present characters very much like ourselves – who hang in the balance between heaven and earth. Speak to us through this family saga, that we may better know how close you come to us in the ups and downs of our very lives. AMEN.

*The Reading of Scripture*

As the David saga unfolds, there are many places where one could easily say something funny and flippant about those who speak of looking to the Bible for family values, but it is sadder than that. It is true – that the Bible does say important things about what family life should look like: “honor your father and mother,” “a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife,” “if a hungry child asks for a fish, would you give it a snake instead?” “live in harmony with one another.” There are all kinds of biblical admonitions about how to relate to one another in peace, with mutual support within families and in community, but the bible does not paint a picture of an idyllic family. The good news is that it is more real than that, it comes closer to our own complex webs of relating to one another, than any simplistic assumption that the bible contains a blueprint of “family values.” Truth be told, the Bible contains a message about family life that is more profound than any contemporary slogan.

No story is quite as poignant as the one before us where a family is suffering from conflict, alienation, lost hopes, dashed dreams and inconsolable grief. Today's tragic episode in David's life is told with great skill -- and great honesty. It is full of drama and ends with the pathetic cry of a grieving father, a father whose grief is made all the more dramatic because he is King David. Up to this point, the lectionary readings prescribed for these summer Sundays have focused on David, so let me remind you about the sad story of Absalom. In his book, Peculiar Treasures, Frederick Buechner characterizes Absalom this way: "Almost from the start, Absalom had a number of strikes against him. For one thing, he was much too handsome for his own good, and his special pride was such a magnificent head of hair that once a year when he had it trimmed, the trimmings alone tipped the scales at three and a half pounds. For another thing, his father, King David, was always either spoiling him rotten or reading him the riot act. This did not promote stability of character. He murdered his lecherous brother Amnon for fooling around with their sister Tamar." (1) (Here I depart from Buechner to say that “fooling around with” is a mild description of what Amnon did, and to keep the sermon within the “PG-13” rating range, I won’t go into the violent details. It’s all there if you want to look it up.) Since David had at least six known wives and concubines (there’s that family values thing again), Amnon was the half

brother of Absalom and Tamar who were full blooded siblings. Because of what Amon did to Tamar, in a rage of revenge, with a well planned plot, Absalom killed David's eldest son, Amnon. Father David basically exiles Absalom, and when the old war-horse Joab would not help Absalom patch things up with David afterwards, Absalom set fire to Joab's hay field. (I don't know about you, but my large extended family that contends with divorce, mental illness, addiction and all kinds of weird dysfunction, is looking pretty normal about now!) David finally allows Absalom to return to Jerusalem, but this was no "Welcome of the Prodigal" Jesus talks about, because David refuses to lay eyes on his son. So Absalom ingratiates himself with the people of the city, leads a revolt against his father, and a sizable number of troops join him, to the point that David himself flees the city for the uprising.

That is where today's scripture reading begins, in the middle of a conflict on the battlefield of a full-scale civil war ultimately pitting father against son. On the eve of the crucial battle, David is a wreck. If he was afraid he might lose his throne, he was even more afraid he might lose Absalom. The boy was the thorn in his flesh, but he was also the apple of his eye, and before the fighting started, David told his commanders – if Absalom fell into their clutches, they must promise to go easy on him for his father's sake. David's last word to his generals was the request that they "deal gently for my sake with the young man Absalom." It is a note of fatherly tenderness in the middle of great bloodshed, intrigue and duplicity. Yet the royal plea for gentleness is swept aside as the tragedy unfolds. The prophet Nathan had told David things would go badly in his house, and the prophecy reaches its painful fulfillment in this chapter.

Remembering what had happened to his hay field, when old Joab found Absalom caught in the branches of an oak tree by his beautiful hair, he ran him through with three spears to the heart without blinking an eye. When they broke the news to David, it broke his heart, just as simple as that. He cried out in words that have echoed down the centuries ever since. "O my son Absalom, my son, my son. Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son" David meant it, of course. If he could have done the boy's dying for him, he would have done it. If he could have paid the price for the boy's betrayal of him, he would have paid it. If he could have given his own life to make the boy alive again, he would have given it. But even a king can't do things like that. As later history will prove, it takes a God. (2)

This story ends, with David's deep regret, with a father crying into the night in sheer agony over losing his son, over the sad state of his family, over the high cost of fulfilling his royal responsibilities. It takes a God, indeed, to bring life back to this family, so bent on self-destruction, and therein lies the good news of this ancient, powerful chapter in our family album. The writer of this tragic tale does not sum it up in some easy moral lesson. Rather, we are left with a plaintive cry and mournful note ringing in our ears: O Absalom, my son, my son... The gift of this story to us is this public expression of grief. King David's wail for Absalom echoes in every family tragedy, in every parent full of regret for what might have been but is not.

The poet, Randall Jarrell, spoke of "the dark, uneasy world of family life – where the greatest can fail." (3) So that we will see, and know and understand that it is a story about us, here the Bible presents the dark, uneasy world of family life. It puts a spotlight on it, and the exposure of it is the gospel grace for us. So often we are crippled, not just by the tragedies of family life, but by their concealment, living with secrets that we dare not expose for fear of what others might think. Frequently it is the secrecy of pain in a family that becomes the real tragedy breaking the family all to pieces. Earlier in this saga, one of the things that the Lord said to David through the prophet Nathan was that while David had committed his sins of adultery and deceit secretly, the Lord would divide his house before all Israel, and before the sun. Was it the Lord's judgment upon David? To be

sure, but it was also a way of bringing light to "the dark, uneasy world of family life" for all of us.

In his book about King David and spirituality, Presbyterian minister and professor of theology, Eugene Peterson says this: "Entering into a life of faith, living a Davidic life, following Jesus, centering our life in the worship of God does not exempt us from suffering. Christians get cancer in the same proportion as non-Christians. Believers are involved in as many automobile accidents as nonbelievers. When you hit your thumb with a hammer, it hurts just as much after you've accepted Christ as your Lord and Savior as it did before. While there are some prominent religious leaders in North America who are giving tips on successful marriage and family life, and even how to succeed in business, we did not so learn that faith from scripture and our ancestors. Suffering has a history, and it helps to know it. The difficulties that come into our lives are not arbitrary intrusions; they are elements in a complex web of interconnecting sins and mercies. This doesn't mean that we can diagram lines of causation or responsibility in suffering. What we need to know is that suffering is neither an impersonal fate nor a cut-and-dried moral punishment. We're implicated in a world of sin," says Peterson, "sometimes ours and sometimes others', and therefore in a world of suffering." (4)

My friends, the Bible places David's sheer grief before us and allows us to watch the king probe the reality of life, the obscenity of war, and the wretchedness of death. The grief is unresolved. Life can go on, but life will never be the same again. The grief will linger, for David and for us, forever. What we know about David, though, because his character is drawn in such detail, is that sinfulness, pain, and suffering always bring David to himself. When he realizes all the wrongs he has committed, and all the people he has failed, he faces the truth about himself and the truth about God. His honest grief brings him into the presence of the God of mercy and grace and love. Now, that is a "family value" I can believe in and celebrate – come what may. AMEN.

#### NOTES

- 1) Frederick Buechner, Peculiar Treasures: A Biblical Who's Who, p. 5.
- 2) Buechner, p. 5.
- 3) Willimon, Pulpit Resource, July-Sept., 1997, p. 24.
- 4) Eugene Peterson, Leap Over a Wall: Reflections on the Life of David, p. 194-195.