



Oh, my son Absalom! My son Absalom!

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin
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II Samuel 11:26-12:13a

When the wife of Uriah heard that her husband was dead, she made lamentation for him. When the mourning was over, David sent and brought her to his house, and she became his wife, and bore him a son.

But the thing that David had done displeased the Lord, and the Lord sent Nathan to David. He came to him, and said to him, 'There were two men in a certain city, one rich and the other poor. The rich man had very many flocks and herds; but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. He brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children; it used to eat of his meagre fare, and drink from his cup, and lie in his bosom, and it was like a daughter to him. Now there came a traveller to the rich man, and he was loath to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him, but he took the poor man's lamb, and prepared that for the guest who had come to him.' Then David's anger was greatly kindled against the man. He said to Nathan, 'As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die; he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity.'

Nathan said to David, 'You are the man! Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: I anointed you king over Israel, and I rescued you from the hand of Saul; I gave you your master's house, and your master's wives into your bosom, and gave you the house of Israel and of Judah; and if that had been too little, I would have added as much more. Why have you despised the word of the Lord, to do what is evil in his sight? You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword, and have taken his wife to be your wife, and have killed him with the sword of the Ammonites. Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house, for you have despised me, and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife. Thus says the Lord: I will raise up trouble against you from within your own house; and I will take your wives before your eyes, and give them to your neighbour, and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this very sun. For you did it secretly; but I will do this thing before all Israel, and before the sun.' David said to Nathan, 'I have sinned against the Lord.'

"The king shuddered. He went up to the room over the gate and burst into tears; and, as he wept, he kept saying, "Oh, my son Absalom! My son! My son Absalom! If only I had died instead of you! Oh, Absalom my son, my son!"

Is this the inevitable, if tragic, consequence of the clash between two strong-willed men, a father and son vying for power? Is it the price the king must pay for a life spent maintaining royal privilege and benevolent domination over the people; the necessarily ruthless elimination of those who would rebel against the public order? Is it frustration with an impatient and headstrong son who could not wait for his inheritance? Is it the cry of a father who knew not how to love his son; rather, lost him in tragedy? Is it the just and due punishment of the king for his transgressions, his selfish betrayal of his people, his position, his God?

This morning, I tell you the story of Absalom, and of his father David, the king of Israel. This tale is found in the Hebrew Scriptures, in the Second Book of Samuel, chapters 13 through 19. Absalom was the third son of David. We hear little of him until we learn that his sister Tamar has been raped by their half-brother Amnon. Taking Tamar into his care, Absalom is livid, but bides his time before taking revenge. Two years have passed when Absalom invites Amnon to a harvest festival where, once the wine and merriment have had their desired result,

Absalom's servants slay Amnon. Anticipating his father's wrath Absalom flees into exile in the nearby realm of his mother's land.

I picture these scenes in fields and large stone halls, members of the royal family accompanied at all times by a bevy of advisors, priests, generals, servants, slaves, and assorted dignitaries. Geographically, the realms were small, with kings and monarchs guarding their territory, wary of possible assault at any time. David, of course, was Israel's great and greatest king, chosen by Yahweh, by God, to lead God's people. Ever since his early confrontation as a handsome young shepherd boy with the Philistine giant Goliath, David was loved and respected by the people. In most of his dealings, David is accompanied by his powerful general Joab. Joab has been with him through the best and the worst, always loyal, always decisive, always acting in the king's best interest. Remember Joab.

It is Joab who perceives that after several years David's anger against Absalom has softened; he persuades David to allow Absalom's return;... but in stages: welcome in Jerusalem, but not – or not yet – in the palace.

The narrative pauses here to tell us this:

“In all Israel there was no one more praised for his beauty than Absalom; from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head, he could not be faulted. When he cut his hair – he shaved it once a year because his hair got too heavy – he would weigh the hair: two hundred shekels, king's weight. To Absalom were born three sons and one daughter called Tamar; she was a beautiful woman.” (14:25-27)

A man of beauty and virility, then; perhaps, one wonders, anointed of God....

Eventually, Joab arranges a meeting. Father and son are reconciled: “Absalom prostrated himself with his face to the ground before the king. And the king kissed Absalom.” Now, all is well and right with the world.

There is no warning for what follows. Immediately, Absalom set out to win the hearts of the people, to turn them against his father. Accompanied by his chariots and horsemen he tarries outside the city gates. When travelers arrive he asks them their business. Invariably they come seeking justice for some wrongdoing and Absalom shows great compassion, bemoans the lack of justice they will receive at the king's court, and assures them that if he had any say, they would receive all they desired, and then some. Parting with a hug, they proceed wishing Absalom were in charge. In time Absalom gathers his court and departs for nearby Hebron, from which he will mount his rebellion in earnest.

What the reader knows – and thus you must know – are the words which hang over David's head and over his rule. For the past two Sundays we heard tell of King David's lust for another man's wife; how he took Bathsheba and then had her husband Uriah, one of David's loyal generals, slain in battle in what was designed to look like an accident. When his prophet Nathan confronted David with his sin, David repented, pleaded for forgiveness. Yahweh does indeed forgive David, but not without cost. Curious – at least to me – is the fact that South Carolina Senator Mark Sanford has likened himself to David in these circumstances, having wronged his wife yet maintained his throne. I wonder if the good senator read the story all the way through.

For, through Nathan, Yahweh says: “I anointed you king of Israel. I saved you from your enemies, gave you your wife, your household, all that you have, and would have given you so much more. Why did you show contempt for me by displeasing me, putting Uriah to the sword, taking his wife to be your wife?! Out of your own household I shall raise misfortune for you. Before your very eyes I shall take your wives and give them to your neighbor, who will lie with your wives in broad daylight. You have worked in secret, but I shall work this for all Israel to see. Your sins are forgiven you. You are not to die. But the child born to you will die.” (12:7-15)

Learning of Absalom's removal to Hebron, and knowing how many of the people now supported him, David left Jerusalem, that he not be trapped within. He left behind ten of his concubines to watch over the palace. And also a trusted advisor named Hushai, who would endear himself to Absalom and thus become a spy in David's service.

David's departure from his own palace and city is colorfully narrated: with some cheering their great king, and others – his enemies, those loyal to the tribes he had crushed on his way to power – cursing him just as loudly. Meeting no resistance, Absalom entered Jerusalem, set up a tent on the flat roof of his father's palace, and there in broad daylight for all to see, took each of his father's ten concubines.

Preparing for battle with his father, Absalom foolishly, unwittingly heeds the advice of Hushai, his father's spy. The text reads like a tale of our own Civil War; who moved where, and camped here; who sent their scouts ahead and their troops to the left flank or the right; who provided rations, who helped or betrayed them. When the great and terrible day dawns, King David meets with his three commanding generals, Joab among them and issues this last order: “For my sake, treat young Absalom gently!” And – says the text – “the troops all heard the king give all the commanders these orders about Absalom.” An unlikely, conflicted, and perhaps impossible order. There is nothing clear in this tale when it comes to right and wrong: honor and love and loyalty and deceit

and betrayal all woven inextricably together.

It was a horrific battle, with more than 20,000 casualties, and the fighting spread through out the region. Absalom, we are told, happened to run into some of David's guards. Fleeing on a mule, he passed under a great oak tree. His hair and head – Absalom's beautiful hair – got caught in the branches. The mule went on and he was left hanging between heaven and earth. The soldiers reported back to Joab. Mindful of the king's orders the soldiers did not touch him. But wasting no time, with three spears Joab killed Absalom there in the oak tree. We're permitted to imagine that Joab knew and did what was needed, what was best – even if his liege could not. Joab sounded the trumpet, the fighting ceased, and those who had been fighting with Absalom fled.

When King David saw the messenger approach with news, he was hopeful. "Is all well with young Absalom," he asked. When he learned that his son was dead, "the king shuddered. He went up to the room over the gate and burst into tears; and, as he wept, he kept saying, "Oh, my son Absalom! My son! My son Absalom! If only I had died instead of you! Oh, Absalom my son, my son!"

"Word was brought to Joab," the text continues: "The king is weeping and mourning for Absalom.' And for the entire army that day, victory was turned to mourning, the troops having learnt that the king was grieving for his son. And that day the troops came furtively back into town, like troops creeping shamefacedly away when deserting in battle. The king had covered his face and kept crying aloud, 'My son Absalom! Oh, Absalom my son, my son!'"

Says Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann, "David's cry is an anguished review of all that could have been and was not, of dreams so feebly enacted, of caring so selfishly limited. The specifics of the past are much too deep and too painful to utter. Now David in his abandon gathers all that past together in the simple, anguished acknowledgement, "My son." "The narrative places David's grief naked before us and allows us to watch the king probe the reality of life, the obscenity of war, the wretchedness of death. Surely others grieved that day, not for Absalom but for unnamed sons loved even more than the king loved [his own]. The grief is unresolved, as we knew it would be, as we know it must be. How odd that no one offers to David any gesture of healing. He is alone in the moment. No one intrudes on the king in the midst of the king's hurt." (pp.323-24)

Joab, however, does not leave him alone; he tells him what no one else would dare. The important matter is the victory that makes the kingdom safe once again. With this selfish lament, David is risking the loyalty of his people and his troops; turning their victory into shame. Joab issues an ultimatum to David: "Go make a public appearance. Stand on the balcony, wave to the crowd, salute the flag, thank the troops." Brueggemann concludes: "David obeys. The king's public appearance restores order and confidence. The people are reassured. The king lives. Life can go on... but never in the same way. The narrative leaves us with the residue of grief unresolved. The grief will linger, for David and for us, forever. Life must go on, but it really does not. David, like most of us, continues, but has died some. We respect, fear, and obey Joab, but we finally are not convinced. In this awful moment, David cannot really choose so easily as did Joab, between son and throne, between power and grief. Power will dominate, but sadness will have its own terrible, unsatiated power." (p.325)

We know this too well.

Amen.

Brueggemann, Walter, *First and Second Samuel*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, John Knox Press, 1990