

Absalom, Absalom!

They may seem like an odd pairing, these two Scriptures I read this morning. On the one hand, there is the end of the story of King David's son, Absalom; a classic tragedy filled with revenge, pride, misunderstanding and death. On the other hand, there is the sound advice from the Apostle Paul to the Christians in Ephesus; a passage filled with practical and uplifting cues for how best to live life in the Way of Jesus. The juxtaposition in many ways seems like an ironic choice by the ones who devised the Revised Common Lectionary – Absalom's life seems like an object lesson in how not to live out Paul's teaching. But as I focus on the story of Absalom this morning, I hope that you will hear the resonances between the two passages, how anger and vengeance and backbiting lead one away from imitating the love of God, even when others are displaying a forgiving, grieving love similar to the love of God through Christ for the world. I also hope to illustrate this morning how we may find in this story from II Samuel important truths about the nature of grief – the grief of King David for his son, Absalom; our grief over our own losses and failures; and the grief of God over the pain and brokenness of humanity. Most importantly, I hope we can find in our consideration of these two passages the keys to surviving grief and finding hope, even when times seem dark.

We should begin with a review of the story of Absalom – one that may not be familiar to everyone this morning and one on which all of us will likely need a refresher. Absalom was David's third son, the child of Mā'acah, the daughter of the king of Geshur. In II Samuel 14, we find that "No one in all Israel was so admired for his beauty as Absalom; from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head he was without blemish. When he cut his hair – he had to have it cut every year, for it grew too heavy for him – the hair of his head weighed two hundred shekels by the royal weight;" about five pounds, in other words. Beauty must have run in his family, because the 13th chapter of II Samuel tells us that his sister Tamar was also beautiful; so beautiful, in fact, that David's eldest son Amnon fell in love with his half-sister and pined away for her, until at last he lured her to his quarters by a subterfuge and raped her. Perhaps Amnon had gathered from his father's exploits with Bathsheba that he, too, could have anything he wanted. But unlike David, who married the woman he had used and repented of his sin and fathered Solomon, Amnon cast Tamar out once he had had his fill. Absalom, not surprisingly, swore revenge but bided his time for two years. Perhaps he received but ignored advice similar to that Paul gave the Ephesians: "Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil." After lulling his brother into a false sense of security, Absalom invited Amnon to join him on a sheep shearing expedition and, once safely away from the palace, had his servants kill his older brother. Just as Nathan predicted, the sword was active in David's house. Absalom then fled into exile for three years to the court of his grandfather and even after he was allowed to come back to Jerusalem was banished from his father's presence for another two years.

Joab, David's great general who was complicit with his king in the murder of Bathsheba's husband, managed to reconcile David and Absalom but even then things did not go well. Absalom apparently thought his father had treated him shabbily by not forgiving him for Amnon's death more quickly! Using his good looks and charm to his advantage, he renewed his popularity with the people of Jerusalem, acting as a benefactor and settler of disputes. Usurping his father's royal prerogative to act as a judge for the people, he cast aspersions on David's ability to administer justice. Again, Absalom showed himself to be living far from the Godly ideal Paul wrote about: "Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for

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building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear.” Absalom’s talk was not to build up but to tear down the King whom God had chosen. When he was confident of his base in the capital, he went to the city of Hebron, had himself declared king, gathered an army and marched on Jerusalem. David fled the capital with his loyal retainers and his personal army and Absalom set himself up in the palace, going so far as to take possession of ten of his father’s concubines in a rather public act, fulfilling yet more of Nathan’s prophecy.

But the beautiful young man underestimated his father and his father’s army as well as the number of people who remained faithful to the aging king. Safely across Jordan from his murderous son, David found that the people rallied to him, supplying his army and household with everything they might need. And although he bowed to the combined advice of his generals and remained behind the lines while they went into battle against Absalom’s insurgents, he publicly ordered them to be careful of his son’s person. “Deal gently for my sake with the young man Absalom,” David told them.

There are a number of theories as to what happened next. Indeed, there even appear to be two versions of the story in II Samuel. Trying to make sense of the confusion of battle and the motives of combatants was no easier in David’s time than it is in ours. What is certain is that Absalom’s troops were routed by the more experienced soldiers under Joab, Abishai and Ittai. The young pretender was snared on the back of his mule by a tree branch, perhaps by all that beautiful hair of which he was so proud. Left dangling and helpless, spotted by his enemies, he was quickly slain, either by Joab himself or by his troops. Why were David’s orders ignored? Had Joab, previously a peacemaker between the King and his son, decided that Absalom would be a continuing danger to his King and the empire? Was he protecting the old king from his foolhardy love for his son? Was Joab angling for the throne himself? Or was David himself playing a double game, publicly ordering Absalom’s safety while giving a wink and a nod to Joab, signifying that someone should rid him of this troublesome son?

But no matter the details of how and why Absalom’s life came to an end, there can be no doubt about his father’s reaction. If you knew nothing else of the story of Absalom when you came here this morning, chances are you knew about David’s cry of grief. It echoes in our minds as we read, in our ears as we hear, as it must have echoed in the stone halls of the palace three thousand years ago when David gave way to his grief: “O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!”

We know, from deep within us, that David’s outburst was authentic. It is a terrible thing to lose a child. Those of us who have never experienced such a grief can only draw approximations to its impact. In my own family’s history, my parents lost their first two children in infancy. Their first child, my sister Désirée Michelle, a happy, bubbling baby at five months old, was carried away in less than twelve hours by a virulent strain of meningitis. Thirteen months later, their second baby, named David Neal, after my father, lived less than 24 hours, killed by the same hyaline membrane syndrome that claimed John and Jackie Kennedy’s baby three years later. The two losses left deep scars in my parents. They didn’t talk about it much — I was well into my teen years before I discovered that my mother had been institutionalized with depression after that awful time — but neither were Désirée and Davy a family secret. As a little boy, I was allowed to look through their baby books and the few mementos of their brief lives whenever I

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chose and I often speculated on what it would be like to have a big sister and a big brother. But there was always a shadow, a sense of deep sadness when my parents would mention them and it is true of my father to this day, fifty years after the fact. In 1978, my Uncle Bob and his family were poisoned as they slept by toxic fumes from insulation newly installed in their home. My Aunt Bonnie and Cousin Barry died that night, my cousin Tonya died of the aftereffects the next February. In a story reminiscent of our Scripture for the morning, I will always remember how it was reported to me that when he was released from the hospital and re-entered the house where his wife and son had died, my Uncle Bob went to my Cousin Barry's room and sat on his bed and wept, "My boy, my boy!" "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!"

But even if we have been spared the loss of a child, there is no doubt that we can all find a connection with David's grief. The death of any loved one, a parent, a spouse, a friend, can be a wrenching, wounding blow. We may well take comfort in the understanding that they are caught up in God's love, in the faith that we will be reunited some day on the far side bank of Jordan, but the grief of parting and the void in our lives is real and not to be casually dismissed. There are times, even in our certainty in the grace of our God and of God's Christ, that we should set aside the giving and receiving of words of comfort and simply stand in mute solidarity with those who mourn. Sometimes, there is nothing that will console the loss of Absalom, but the gift of presence and understanding will be remembered when tears have dried. Nor are our griefs limited to the physical death of family and intimate friends. We may experience the same depth of passion at the breaking of a relationship, the loss of a career, the death of a dream. We may feel grief as we consider opportunities we have missed to do good; times that we have lived in ways in which we fell short of our own standards and those of our loving God. Well did the Eleventh Century monk, Herman of Reichenau, name this world "this vale of tears" when he composed the prayer *Salve Regina*, which is sung in Catholic and Anglican churches to this very day: "Hail, holy Queen, Mother of Mercy, / our life, our sweetness and our hope. / To thee do we cry, poor banished children of Eve; / to thee do we send up our sighs, / mourning and weeping in this vale of tears."

There is another perspective we should consider this morning. Listen to the telling of the story by Frederick Buechner in his book, *Peculiar Treasures: A Biblical Who's Who*: "All Israel found [Absalom's] derring-do irresistible, of course, and when he finally led a revolt against his father, a lot of them join him. On the eve of the crucial battle, David was a wreck. If he was afraid he might lose his throne, he was even more afraid he might lose Absalom. The boy was a thorn in his flesh, but he was also the apple of his eye, and before the fighting started, he told the chiefs of staff till they were sick of hearing it that if Absalom fell into their clutches, they must promise to go easy on him for his father's sake. ...old Joab kept his fingers crossed, and when he found Absalom caught in the branches of an oak tree by his beautiful hair, he ran him through without blinking an eye. When they broke the news to David, it broke his heart, just as simple as that, and he cried out in words that have echoed down the centuries ever since. 'O my son, Absalom, my son, my son. Would that I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son.' He 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 was to prove, it takes a God."

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Buechner has touched on another deep correspondence for David's grief. David, you will remember, was the one called in both Old and New Testaments, "the man after God's own heart." In his love for Absalom, as Lawrence Moore writes, "we see David as a father who will not give up on or disown his wayward, rebellious, murderous son. What more does Absalom need to do to provoke David into disowning him utterly? Why should we mourn this beautiful, treacherous, patricidal young man, whose capture is such a wonderful example of poetic justice? Aren't we with Joab and the others, who are so incensed with Absalom's evil that they ignore David's weakness and put him to a well-deserved death – a death demanded by justice and law? What an utter waste of love, emotion and human life David's grief and weakness for Absalom has proved!" And yet, as Moore continues, David's extravagantly forgiving love for this lost son reminds us of another story – one that Jesus told. "It's a parable of grace," Moore writes, "about the totally unreasonable, undignified, unjust and utterly ridiculous love of the father for a son who wants him dead! ... In other words, we can see in David's very weaknesses – his love for his son, his reluctance to punish rebellion and execute his enemies, his refusal to stand on royal dignity – a mirror of God's own gracious and loving passion for the world."

In David's grief for Absalom, we see the human reflection of God's grief over all of God's rebellious children. And just as Jesus revealed that grieving love in the story we often call "The Prodigal Son," so he also revealed it in his own lament over Jerusalem. Both Matthew and Luke record the words: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing." And in a similar manner, Jesus echoes the words of David to the generals, "Deal gently for my sake with the young man Absalom," when he offers up his prayer to his Father from the very cross, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." Indeed, as Paul reminded the Ephesians, "Christ loved us and gave himself up for us," despite all we may have done to grieve the Holy Spirit of God. This is the love and kindness and forgiveness we are to imitate, not the pride and vengeance and anger of Absalom. Perhaps one of the great griefs in our lives is that most of us still tend to be more like Absalom than like Jesus. In his commentary on the Absalom story, Scott Hoezee recalls the Oscar-winning film by Clint Eastwood, "Unforgiven." Trying to justify his killing of a man, a young gunslinger says, "Well, I guess he had it comin' to him." Eastwood, who played a retired gunfighter as well as producing and directing the movie, replies, "We all got it comin' to us, kid."

Fortunately for us, God is neither a general impatient with his king's enemies, regardless of their heritage, nor a young gunfighter eager to make his bones. Our God is the grieving Father, willing to do anything, even to giving up his own life, in order to save us from the destruction we so assiduously court for ourselves. Our God is also the Man of Sorrows, acquainted with grief, who understands our heartbreak. Our God is the Paraclete, the Comforter, the one who slips through the shadows of our darkest night of the soul to surround us with love, to comfort us when we mourn, to walk beside us through the very valley of the shadow of death, this vale of tears. Our God is not proven impotent to save us, as David was at the last incapable of saving Absalom. We rest secure in the knowledge that God is on our side and at our side, no matter what ills betide us. "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all

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creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Thanks be to God.