

“More Bible Stories: Absalom, Someone’s Son”

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2 Samuel 18: 5-9, 15, 31-33 Rev. Patricia Weatherwax

The king ordered Joab and Abishai and Ittai, saying, “Deal gently for my sake with the young man Absalom.” And all the people heard when the king gave orders to all the commanders concerning Absalom.

So the army went out into the field against Israel; and the battle was fought in the forest of Ephraim. The men of Israel were defeated there by the servants of David, and the slaughter there was great on that day, twenty thousand men. The battle spread over the face of all the country; and the forest claimed more victims that day than the sword.

Absalom happened to meet the servants of David. Absalom was riding on his mule, and the mule went under the thick branches of a great oak. His head caught fast in the oak, and he was left hanging between heaven and earth, while the mule that was under him went on. ... (to verse 15)

15 And ten young men, Joab’s armor-bearers, surrounded Absalom and struck him, and killed him. ... (to verse 31)

31 Then the Cushite came; and the Cushite said, “Good tidings for my lord the king! For the LORD has vindicated you this day, delivering you from the power of all who rose up against you.” The king said to the Cushite, “Is it well with the young man Absalom?” The Cushite answered, “May the enemies of my lord the king, and all who rise up to do you harm, be like that young man.”

The king was deeply moved, and went up to the chamber over the gate, and wept; and as he went, he said, “O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!” The Word of the LORD.

INTRODUCTION

We started this service with a blessed assurance: Jesus said his burden for us is light. The invitation we have received, to follow Jesus, is not burdensome. Turning to Jesus is our way to comfort and strength when we are burdened by life. Sometimes, though, our burden in life isn’t light. Most of us here have had significant struggles, whether by our own making or through the actions of someone we loved, or some odd act of God. Some of us have been in places that we’d never willingly go, but we went there because someone we loved was in a hell-like place on earth.

Of the many lessons to be learned from the life of David, the tragic death of his children has to be one of the saddest. Specifically, his oldest son was murdered. An infant son died a week after birth. His second son is only mentioned by name and apparently died young or was unable to be a successor to David’s throne. And now this. The Old Testament narratives, including this story about David remind us again that this human life has always been fragile and difficult, but also that God is with us.

CONTEXT

By this point in his life, King David was doing pretty well. There are several chapters of context around this account. And again, it matters. The stuff, the really bad stuff in David's and our lives, usually happens in a much larger context. Sometimes things make the most sense when you know the context. And sometimes life doesn't make sense, even in context. Things happen that may seem random, arbitrary, head-scratchable. Why did that happen, to them, to me? What does it mean?

The story of Absalom and David's relationship is fascinating. We can't go into all the details, but you can read them in 2 Samuel 13 to 18 if you'd like to get more of the context. Here's the gist: Absalom, was the third son of David, King of Israel by a politically motivated marriage to Maacah, daughter of another regional leader. We don't hear anything at all about the second son, Kileab, son of Abigail, but the Abigail and Nabal and David story is another interesting relationship adventure of David (1 Sam 25). It's not as complicated as David and Bathsheba, but just about as quirky.

Second Samuel 14:25 describes Absalom as the most handsome man in the kingdom. Out of fear of his father David, Absalom left Jerusalem, was in hiding, banished for three years. During that time, scripture says that David "longed to go out to Absalom,". He really missed him! Absalom left because he had killed his sister's rapist, who happened to be their own older half-brother, David's first-born son Amnon. Family tensions were high and there was intense grief. Just to be very clear, when people talk about the sanctity of biblically-defined marriage and family values, they aren't talking about David.

Then, there was Joab, David's lead military leader and advisor. He's a big part of this situation. We're not always sure whose side Joab is on. He convinced David to welcome Absalom back into Jerusalem. God works with us so that a banished or estranged person does not have to remain isolated forever. That's what God attempts: repentance, and reunification. That's what happened between God and David after his sin with Bathsheba and Uriah. God wants to restore the outcast, the estranged sons and daughters. That's what Jesus died to do, too. So anyway, Absalom comes home to Jerusalem, but he and his dad are still estranged.

Absalom doesn't take his invitation to return to the community as enough. He wants more. He wants to be king without waiting for the appropriate succession. Like the Prodigal son (Luke 15) Absalom is in a hurry to have more, sooner rather than later.

We didn't look at the story of how David was called into a leadership position, but it was one we may remember from childhood or other sermons along the way, that: "God doesn't look at things like humans do. Humans see only what is visible to the eyes, but the Lord sees into the heart." (1 Sam 16:7). David was handsome, so was his son Absalom. We don't know why that's pertinent, but leaders often are.

Other things the Bible says about Absalom, besides the fact that his hair weighs five pounds, is that he's a great politician. He's charismatic, knowing how to win friends and influence people. His tactics sound like our political campaigns: exaggerated criticism of the opponent and big promises on how he'd be better!

Then, Absalom lead a rebellion against his father, attempting to stage a coup. A fierce war ensues. Even then, David continued to tell his military leaders to "treat Absalom gently". That's maybe appropriate from a father but probably not logical coming from the king to the leaders of his army.

How did this father/son duo get to this point? Who is to responsible for this messed up family? David's parental failures and moral failings influenced his heirs, to be sure. While it's clear that David has a history of moral failure, it's clear that Absalom's downfall is the result of Absalom's own choices. Remember, one of the lessons from the David and Bathsheba account: We sin against God, David prayed "against you only have I sinned, oh Lord!" (2 Sam. 12:13 and Psalm 51:4) We sin against God, others deal with the consequences of our sin.

PREQUEL

This Absalom account is one of the lesser known stories of David. You may never have heard it. Or maybe, like me, you remember hearing it, (Absalom, my son, oh, my son!) but not much else. My mom and my previous pastors were good readers. I remember hearing mom and at least one preacher read this text. It's one, if you hear it read with emotional, it sticks. I know my mom read it with a devotional, one night at the dinner table when I was a teen. (My mom was very serious about our time of devotional readings. I wish I had been more consistent with my own kids.) Hearing this was one of those glimpses into parenting that teens have- wow, maybe parents do care?! Oh, yeah, kids, even more than you realize.

There are a few kids' lessons about this, but for the most part it really is another adult lesson from David's life. The detail of handsome Absalom and his deadly hair gets a big emphasis with the kids.

LESSONS

It wasn't in the text we read, but in the next several verses Joab really gets on David's case for grieving, because it was making others feel bad. A first lesson is please don't rush the parent who is grieving. Kenneth Haugk, founder of Stephen ministry, in his book "Don't Sing Songs to a Heavy Heart" says we are all too quick to want to fix those who are struggling:

Wanting to fix things -- and fix things right away-- does not make you bad. It makes you human. Recognizing this very human tendency can give you a tremendous head start in managing it. ...

Fixing can be okay, as long as it's dinner or the other person's car. But trying to fix a person is not an appropriate or even attainable goal. Here's a good rule of thumb: *Fix things; relate to people*. ... Your best agenda is *not* to have an agenda-- except to follow the agenda of the suffering person. When you do that you are really caring.

Second, Please, when someone dies, don't blame anyone. Not the one who died for dying, and not anyone else, Not even yourself for not being able to stop it. No one can significantly control another adult or stop another's living and dying.

David couldn't save his son Absalom even though he tried to protect him. David couldn't save his children from death or harm, any more than we can fully protect or save our children. May God bless the young local mom who was shot in her back this past week, trying to protect her children.

But God has accomplished what we cannot do. God gave Jesus Christ, that's enough. He gave up His beloved so that we might become His beloved. What no one can do (save their loved ones), God can do, physically, emotionally, spiritually. God has provided the forgiveness of sins and the love which we desperately want and need. "Our help is in the name of the LORD, creator of heaven and earth" (Psalm 124:8).

A final lesson to remember from David and Absalom: there is no grief like a parent burying a child, of any age. My grandfather died less than a year after my dad. Family members say grandpa died of a broken heart. My mom buried her son, my oldest brother, and it was the last straw for her frail health. Every parent who loses a child says something like what David said: "Oh, my child! If only I had died instead of you!" (2 Samuel 18:33)

A parent I know from this community has dealt with the death of a young adult son. It was 5 years ago and she says: "Not a day goes by without grief", She understands we "do not grieve without hope" (1 Thes 4:13). She believes her son is with God, safe, healthy and happy. Some of you know Kristi Angelo; she's a Michigan State Trooper, with a large extended family around Battle Creek. She's done some continuing education events for our Stephen Ministry group. She gave me permission to use her story and include her name. Her son Nick was a friend of one of my daughters and died from an accidental drug overdose.

Kristi says she is used to her grief, but it's never done. It's never gone. She at times feels lost and cheated. Sometimes the grief still overwhelms her. She reminded me that those of us who have not dealt with that level of grief can not, nor do we want to ever know how it feels.

Trooper Angelo described her son as: kind sensitive, adventurous, creative and frustrating! He was truly non judgmental toward others, filled with empathy and just an awesome kid. He probably had bipolar mental illness, usually cycling up or down and struggling to fit into our structured and stress filled world. With mental health concerns

comes stigma, We've come a long way, but emotional and mental health concerns are still seen as personal weaknesses not physiological diseases.

The young man, the son of a respected State Police officer was on prescribed medications for emotional stability and then became ill with a kidney stone, feverish and in pain. He was given a narcotic pain medication, the kind doctor's used to give out oh so routinely. Because of the intense pain and his perceived tolerance for pain meds, he took too many. He stopped breathing and died, asleep on his couch. He was only 30 years old.

All his mom wants is that people be more aware of the dangers of narcotic use, and show empathy to grieving people, the kind of caring that her son was known for. Sometimes we forget that those around us continually deal with this kind of grief and sadness. If you've lost a child of any age, would you stand so we can acknowledge that we know your inner scars don't always show, but are always there? God loves you and so do we.

CONCLUSION

The NIV Study Bible I have I use cautiously. It has a great concordance and topical index system, but the editors in an essay on women in leadership, call women preachers "extreme". It does give a good list of Biblical references about handling grief. When you grieve:

1. Accept comfort from friends (that's us). "We are called to love tenderly".
2. Receive comfort from God. Jesus promised that "those who mourn will be comforted" (Matt 5:4).
3. Know without a doubt that sometime in our future: "God will wipe every tear from our eyes. No one will die. No one will ever cry or be sad for any reason. No one will ever have trouble." In the age to come, "these old things are gone." (Rev. 21:4, Worldwide English Version).

What a great day that will be. Until then, we are loving, realizing we don't know the pain someone else may be carrying. God help us! amen