

2 Samuel 18:5-9, 15, 31-33; John 6:35, 41-51

Grace to you and peace, from God who is, who was, and who is to come. Amen.

At our Saturday evening services, we've been doing a semi-continuous reading of the Old Testament, and last week we had the reading from 2 Samuel 11 and the first part of chapter 12 where the prophet Nathan confronts King David over David's affair with Bathsheba and the subsequent murder of her husband. We then jump all the way into chapter 18 and we get this strange little story about David's son Absalom. To try to really understand what's going on, I need to try to fill us in on the details of those six or so chapters.

Realize that David has several wives and therefore has many children; he has at least seven sons. The oldest of his sons is a man named Amnon. Amnon has a huge, major crush on his half-sister Tamar, who has a full-blood brother named Absalom. But Amnon had this major crush on Tamar that was so bad that he devised with a friend of his to get his father (the king) to get Tamar to come and visit him when he's all alone. And once the two of them (Amnon and his half-sister Tamar) are alone, he expresses his "desire" for his sister. And when he has finished expressing his "desire" for her, as much as he was filled with desire and passion for her, he was filled even more so with disgust for her afterwards, and like yesterday's stinking garbage, he throws her out of his room.

Tamar, in turn, goes to her father (the king) and explains to the king what has just happened. The king first of all, sends her to her full brother, Absalom, and then the king does . . . nothing to Amnon. This apparently does not bode well with Tamar's brother Absalom.

Absalom bides his time though. Two years pass, and Absalom throws a big celebration for the sheep shearing (sheep shearing - who knew?). They're having a big party, and he (Absalom) begs his father (the king) to join them for the celebration of the sheep shearing. King David declines the invitation, so Absalom asks if, in his place, the king would send his eldest son Amnon as his representative, to which King David agrees.

Absalom tells all of his servants to let him know when Amnon's heart is, as scripture says, "merry with wine" and then to strike him. He also tells them to have no fear because 'I am the one who is commanding this.' So, that's what happens. They gather for the sheep shearing; Amnon's heart becomes "merry with wine"; Absalom gives the cue; his servants strike and kill the first-born son of the king. All of the other sons of the king, who are gathered at the celebration, see this and figure that there is going to be a mass slaughter of the king's sons, and they get out of there as quickly as possible. Word gets back to the king that Amnon is dead and that Absalom has killed Amnon. And the king . . . does nothing.

Absalom runs away and he hides with a buddy of his in Geshur for about three years. Eventually with the assistance of General Joab (Remember, Joab is the guy who helped David murder Bathsheba's husband. Joab served under King Saul. He switched sides and joined up with David. He's one of these guys who sees that the good of the state is more important than any one individual). Anyway, with the help of General Joab, Absalom is allowed to return to Jerusalem and then, after another couple of years, Absalom is finally allowed into the presence of his father and is officially forgiven for what he has done. So once this is accomplished, once Absalom is free to walk around the city, he hires fifty

men who will run in front of him, shouting his praises, telling everybody what a great guy Absalom is. And every day, Absalom goes out to the main gate of Jerusalem and as people are coming into Jerusalem to do their business, he chats with them, and also asks them what problems they were having, because, as was their right, they were allowed to put their disputes before the king. And as Absalom would listen to their complaints, he would commiserate with them: ‘Oh, your situation is so awful,’ Oh, of course you are in the right and that other person is in the wrong,’ and saying ‘If only I were judge in the land! Then all who had a suit or cause might come to me, and I would give them justice.’ (2 Samuel 15:4) Absalom ingratiates himself with the people of Israel, regardless of how insincere his heart was.

So now, after doing this for a long time, the hearts of the people of Israel were with him (Remember, we use the term “Israel” to talk about the whole country, but really the country is in two sections, a north and a south – we could think of it in terms of ‘confederates’ and ‘the union,’ but it’s not quite same – the southern part of the kingdom, the smaller part, which is where Jerusalem is, was called Judah; the northern part, the larger section, of the kingdom was called Israel.) and when Absalom had ingratiated himself with the vast majority of the people in the northern part of the country (Israel), he gives the command to rise up.

David, in a moment of clarity, actually does something this time. He grabs the few folks who have remained loyal to him and flees. But before leaving Jerusalem, he does a few things: he leaves behind his ten concubines to take care of the palace (if you don’t know what a concubine is, ask me after worship); he sends the ark of the covenant (you remember, the people first built the ark when they were in exodus, and in it they carried the stone tablets that Moses brought down from Mount Horeb), he sends the ark back to the tabernacle in Jerusalem with the high priest (the high priest, who along with his two sons had remained loyal to David), whom he asked to be David’s eyes and ears in Jerusalem; and David was able to sneak his personal advisor, a guy named Hushai the Archite, back into Jerusalem to act as one of Absalom’s advisors. Hushai presents himself to Absalom to be someone like Joab, someone for whom the state is more important than the individual. So Hushai gets himself onto Absalom’s council.

Absalom asks his personal advisor what should be one of his first acts in Jerusalem. His advisor told him (chapter 16, verse 21) that he should “Go in to your father’s concubines, the ones he has left to look after the house; and all Israel will hear that you have made yourself odious to your father, and the hands of all who are with you will be strengthened.” So they pitch a tent on the palace rooftop where everybody in Jerusalem could see what’s going on, and Absalom had sex with the each of his father’s concubines, out in the open, in the sight of the whole city. (This is very similar to not only taking your father’s car – without his permission – when you’re sixteen – after curfew – driving on your permit AND you get pulled over – get taken to the police station – get arrested AND you know your name will be plastered out there in large letters in tomorrow’s *Police Blotter*.) Absalom does this to make himself “odious” to David.

The other thing that Absalom’s personal advisor tells him that he needs to do is, while his father, David, is tired and has no food and is on the run, go out and strike him now, because he won’t have enough energy, he won’t have enough people, to strike back, so go and get him right now. So Absalom, thinking this is not a bad idea, asks Hushai (the advisor secretly loyal to David) what he thinks. Hushai replies to Absalom, “You know that your father and his men are warriors, and when they are enraged, they are like a bear robbed of her cubs in the field. Besides, your father is expert at war; he’s not going to spend the night with the troops, he’s got himself hidden somewhere. And you know if you send your troops out to attack, your father’s soldiers are going to rise up like shadows and

attack and wipe out your troops.” (2 Samuel 17:8) So Hushai advises Absalom, ‘what you need to do is consolidate the people of Israel and get twelve thousand or so troops around you so that then you could go and wipe David off the face of the earth.’ Absalom decides that he likes Hushai’s idea better, and so he waits.

Hushai is able to get words to the high priest, who then in turn gets word to David, that Absalom is waiting, and in that brief moment, David is able to gather together his troops and instead of being the ones who get attacked, David’s troops go on the offensive and bring the battle to Absalom. But before they do that (here we get to today’s lesson), before they do that, David calls his generals together (and by telling his generals, he’s in effect telling the entire army), ‘Go gentle on the young man, Absalom.’ The battle ensues. They are in a forested part of the county and as Absalom is riding along, his hair gets caught in the low-hanging branches of an oak tree.

Now remember, every time David’s likeness is talked about in scripture, he is always referred to as having a ‘ruddy complexion,’ as being a very good looking man. His oldest son, Amnon, was apparently a very good looking young man, as well. But Absalom is apparently the equivalent of Brad Pitt, Ashton Kutcher, and the Jonas Brothers, all rolled into one, and he’s got the Fabio hair going on. But anyway, as he’s riding along, his hair gets caught in the tree, but his ride keeps on going. So there he is, hanging by his hair in the tree. When General Joab, who has remained loyal to King David, hears of this, he takes his elite guard to find Absalom, and summarily executes him.

When David is informed of the death of his son, when David is informed that the guy who directed a coup against him, when David is told that the man responsible for the murder of his first-born, when David is told that Absalom was dead, he publically wept and declared “Would that I had died instead of you.”

I know – it’s a real long story, so let me recap very briefly. David’s oldest son rapes his own half-sister, tosses her aside like yesterday’s garbage, and David does . . . nothing. That girl’s full brother eventually murders his sister’s rapist, and David does . . . nothing. David forgives the man who killed his oldest son and that son then begins to campaign to plot to overthrow the kingdom, and David does . . . nothing. That son rallies the northern part of the kingdom against the king, drives him out of the capitol, publically defiles what belongs to the king, and David finally does do something . . . he runs away. And when David makes that definitive move to retake his throne, he tells his generals “go easy on the boy, don’t hurt him.” Finally, when this murdering usurper to the throne is killed, David weeps and proclaims that he would rather be the one who had died. May I just say, this family could make Jerry Springer go prime time.

Now to be fair, David had no one to blame but himself. Back when he had the confrontation with the prophet Nathan concerning his affair with Bathsheba and the murder of Bathsheba’s husband, God warned David (Chapter 12, verse 10), “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 neighbor . . . For you did it secretly; but I will do this thing before all Israel. . .”

And as I was thinking of this story this past week, and what indeed is the morality going on here, it occurred to me that if we take the name “David” and replace it with the name “God,” and if we take the name “Absalom” and replace it with the name “John” or “Michael” or “Joseph” or “Kathy” or “Judy” or “Sharon,” or whatever your name might happen to be – that puts a little bit of a different

spin on this story. I do, however, hope very strongly that nobody here has raped their half-sister or murdered their half-brother or pretended to care all the while plotting to overthrow the government – but I would bet (and I would be willing to bet a lot) that most, if not all of us, have thought or spoken badly about someone else. And I would bet that most, if not all of us here, have thought about or maybe even tried to get revenge on some real or perceived wrong that has been done to us. And most, if not all of us, have thought that the world might be a better place if a specific person or persons were no longer to be counted among the living.

And when I think of it in those terms, I can see that David's actions (or inactions) are suddenly very relevant to my daily life. I have to say that I am not plotting to murder anybody, but I also know that when I got cut off in traffic the other day, I did think about pulling around in front of the person who did it and putting on my brakes - Very Quickly. Maybe you're thinking about the way your boss chewed you out earlier this week in front of the whole staff. Maybe you're remembering that thing your spouse or your best friend did – you know that thing they do that really bugs you and makes you want to do something back to them?

David again and again and again, offered his children the time and opportunity to change, to do the right thing, to turn themselves from hurting others (and even from hurting themselves) and instead to turn toward loving each other. Maybe I am putting a little bit of a spin on David's inactions, but by not doing anything, he was allowing them the opportunity to repent, to change, to forgive. Which is *exactly* what the Lord God does for each and every one of us. God sees my sin. God is hurt to the core by my sin. God calls me to change. God wants me to change. God loves me enough for me to want to change. And yet, we as human beings, continue to choose to sin. We continue to choose to hurt one another.

Our story today, this example from scripture, shows us rather graphically what happens when we choose to do nothing, when we choose to allow our thirst for revenge, or our desire for power, to lead and guide us. God calls to us. God calls to us, though, to turn from our own sin, to turn from the wrong that we so willingly do, and to turn rather to the love and the grace and the forgiveness of new life, new life in the bread and wine, in the body and blood that Jesus spoke of, that we will celebrate in just a few moments.

If David would have heeded that call instead of focusing on his own lusts and desires and woes; if Absalom would have listened to God reaching out to him; then just as God reached out to David, so too does Christ reach out to us. God calls us to change. And loves us, even when we don't.

Amen