

Psalm 130 ¹ Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord. ² Hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications! ³ If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, who could stand? ⁴ But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered. ⁵ I wait for the Lord; my soul waits, and in God's word I hope; ⁶ my soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning. ⁷ O Israel, hope in the Lord! For with the Lord there is steadfast love, and with him is great power to redeem. ⁸ It is he who will redeem Israel from all its iniquities.

II Samuel 18:5-9, 14b-15, 24, 31-33 ⁵ King David ordered Joab and Abishai and Ittai, saying, "For my sake, deal gently with the young man Absalom." And all the people heard when the king gave orders to all the commanders concerning Absalom. ⁶ So the army went out into the field against Israel, and the battle was fought in the forest of Ephraim. ⁷ The men of Israel were defeated there by the servants of David, and the slaughter there was great on that day – some twenty thousand men. ⁸ The battle spread over the face of all the country, and the forest claimed more victims that day than the sword. ⁹ 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... ^{14b} Joab took three spears in his hand and thrust them into the heart of Absalom while he was still alive in the oak. ¹⁵ And ten young men, Joab's armor-bearers, surrounded Absalom and struck him and killed him... ²⁴ Now David was sitting between the two gates... ³¹ Then the Cushite messenger came and 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." ³² 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 share the fate of that young man." ³³ The king was deeply grieved and went up to the chamber over the gate and wept, saying, "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!"

Psalm 130 and II Samuel 18

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"Out of the Depths, I Cry"

Rev. Amy Terhune

The Rev. David Leininger offers a very succinct summery of today's lesson from II Samuel 18 that goes like this: Civil War...isn't.

It's not civil. It's not pretty. And it's not easy. In today's lesson, we come to the final chapter of a civil war that's been short but raging in Israel. King David was a good king. He governed sensibly. He didn't overtax people. He was relatively fair and impartial. And he was popular. But with that popularity came demands on his time that he couldn't satisfy, so he began to delegate the work of administering justice to some of his underlings, and not all of them had David's good sense. More on that in a moment.

Now, while David was a good king, he wasn't really a great family man. We've seen in our own time those who were good at leading a nation, but never could seem to get it right with those closest to them. For one thing, David had several wives and concubines, and scripture records at least 20 sons and at least 1 daughter. How can one possibly devote time to so many and still run a nation. But he didn't seem to know how to handle situations that hit too close to home. Keep in mind, his sons have seen him take Bathsheba and kill off her husband. They've seen him deal ruthlessly with some enemies and extend mercy to others. So, David keeps everyone on edge. Trouble really escalates when David's oldest son and heir – a guy named Amnon – falls in love with his half-sister Tamar. Consumed by lust, he

rapes her, and David does nothing. Friends, perhaps modern sensibilities are creeping in here, but really: do not underestimate the trauma she experiences, living in a palace with her attacker, facing the prospect that he is in line for the throne, and confronting the reality that her mother is powerless, and her father will not require any accountability on her behalf. There is profound dysfunctionality there. The one person who will act on Tamar's behalf is her full brother, Absalom, third in line for the throne.

Historians tells us that Absalom was very much like his father. He was intelligent, eloquent and very handsome, and that in particular, he sported a magnificent head of hair. David has a soft spot for young Absalom. He sees himself in his son and takes him under his wing, and Absalom seems to revere and even idolize his father as a young adolescent. But Absalom also shares his father's arrogance and a greater share of egotism than David ever had. And when his sister is so callously used and dismissed, and David does nothing, Absalom loses respect for his father. That slow burn within takes over. Absalom kills Amnon, the heir, and flees the country. For three years, he lives in exile. Finally, others intercede on his behalf, and Absalom is permitted to return to Jerusalem. He comes back to his father's house, to the arms of his sister and mother. But his father won't see him. They never talk, never make peace, never resolve their issues. In this case, David is the king of psychological avoidance. Carpet Sweep. Problem solved...NOT!

Absalom notices how David farms out the justice work to others and begins to use it. "If I were king, you could come directly to me. I would see justice done myself". Absalom pokes David in a weak spot and gathers a following. He gains popularity, and eventually, Absalom convinces himself and others that he would be a better king than David. He goes to Hebron, solidifies his position, and mobilizes his people. But he's not as good as he thinks he is. David, meanwhile, plants spies in his camp and sees to it that Absalom gets bad advice militarily. And when Absalom moves against him, David evacuates Jerusalem, and heads out to Mahanaim, a small city just east of the Jordan River. By doing so, David ensures that Absalom will have no choice but to meet him for battle in the intervening land – the forest of Ephraim, known for its thick trees, treacherous terrain, and deadly pits. And as David undoubtedly expected, the forest claimed more lives than the battle. But David's experienced and loyal soldiers fare much better than Absalom's rebels. Scripture reports that 20 thousand men died that day, the bulk of whom were loyal to Absalom.

We can't be sure exactly what happens, but most historians suspect Absalom was fleeing for his life that afternoon, rushing through the forest on his mare, his magnificent hair streaming out behind him, when he gets caught at the neck in a low branch, and his hair is entangled in the thicket. The great Hebrew Bible Scholar Walter Brueggemann suggests that Absalom's hanging there between heaven and earth is symbolic of one "...suspended between life and death, between the sentence of a rebel and the value of a son, between the severity of the king and the yearning of the father." [from Walter Brueggemann, *I & II Samuel*, Interpretations Series (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2000) pg. 319]. David's forces catch him there, uncertain what to do, given that they all knew David had ordered them to "deal gently" with Absalom. When Joab arrives, he decisively defies David's orders, kills Absalom, and buries him in the forest, and David is left with the profound grief of a father losing another child.

Now at this point, you might be thinking to yourself: well, this is all very interesting, as stories go, but so what? That's a fair question, and the lesson itself gives us some answers.

First, there's Absalom. The tragedy of his story is that what began as a quest for justice ends up getting twisted inside of him into nothing but blind hatred. Please understand something: Absalom has a legitimate cause to be angry with his king; his father. As he is prone to do, David messed up royally. He does nothing to hold his older son accountable for a horrendous crime, nothing to assuage the trauma his daughter has experienced, nothing to inspire his younger son with any kind of trust in a higher calling. Absalom is disillusioned by David's moral impotence and apathy. And disillusioned as he

is, he loses his ability to see any humanity in his father. He is consumed by loathing, overcome by hatred, his grief emerging – not as a force for change, but for destruction.

Most of you know by now that I'm a big fan of the hit TV show NCIS. During the Christmas episode of season 8, we're introduced to young man named Matt whose sister was shot and killed in mugging gone wrong. Matt was 19 when his sister died. It's all the more tragic because she was the only family he had. Their parents died years before, and she saw him through the difficult teenage years. Now he's alone, grieving, heartbroken. And when the mugger, who has been in jail several years, gets released on a legal technicality, Matt is angry and (much like Absalom) disillusioned with the legal system. His hate takes over, and that's when he decides he's going to take matters into his own hands. He buys gun, and Matt confronts the mugger outside the halfway house where he's been sent to live. He intends to kill him. And Gibbs tries desperately to talk this kid out of the path he's on, yet nothing seems to be getting through.

But then our Mugger speaks up. And he says, "Look kid, I'd buy you the bullets myself if I thought killing me would help you feel better, but it won't."

And when Matt responds, "You don't know anything about me," that mugger nods.

"I've spent more time in the past few years thinking about you than I've ever thought about anyone else in my life. I barely remember that night. I was so drugged up and in a haze, but I get it now. I took your sister's life. And I wasted mine. Are you really going to let me destroy yours, too?"

It's a surprisingly compassionate statement, and for just a moment, it humanizes that mugger. Matt puts down the gun, and the tears flow.

Friends, there are a lot of people in this world legitimately angry about the injustices of life. There are a lot of people whose anger and frustration have become hate and bitterness. We see it in our society – in school shootings and BLM Riots after George Floyd's death and January 6th, and in political discourse heating up towards a contentious election. There's a lot of hate out there on all side. There's a lot of disillusionment and apathy out there. And there are a lot of closed doors out there – people who don't want to talk to each other; people who don't know what to say to each other, or how to even start a conversation if they were going to speak. There's a lot of exhaustion out there – individuals and families worn down by the playing nice and avoiding a growing list of taboo topics. And more often than not, it seems like the church exacerbates the contention rather than bridging it. Surely Absalom's fate must not be ours, suspended between dichotomies until life is suffocated from us altogether. Surely, there's a word from God to speak into these times? And it's not a word of judgement or condemnation. It's a word of grace, of shared humanity, of a common quest for a just society for all. A word hard to choke out, but crucial. I want to understand. I want to know more. I want to get past what divides us. I want to be a force for reconciliation and peace. I'm willing to do the hard work to get there.

Which brings us to Joab, David's loyal commander. Joab is not disillusioned. He's very much a realist. He deals with facts as they are. The tragedy of Joab's story is that he, too, dehumanizes people, but not with hatred. Joab doesn't believe people can change. Joab has no hope. He's cynical. Joab does not consider the possibility that Absalom might choose a different path if presented with alternative options. What if Absalom had lived? What if he and David had somehow been able to sit down and talk. What if Absalom had been able to lay bare his disillusionment, grief, and anger? What if David acknowledged his failures? What if they'd taken hands and forgiven one another? I've seen God do a lot more with a lot less! Is it so impossible? We'll never know. Because Joab doesn't consider the possibilities, and he doesn't factor into the equation what God can do. All he ever sees is a traitor. He cares neither for the circumstances that put Absalom where he is, nor for the possibility of what Absalom could yet be.

It's said that as a child, Albert Einstein's parents were encouraged to train him in a trade – that he didn't have the intellectual prowess for the university. Michael Jordan didn't make the basketball team his sophomore year, having been told he was too slow to ever make headway in sports. Fred Astaire was rejected during a Hollywood screen test. The casting crew said he "Can't act. Slightly bald. Dances a little." Elvis Presley was turned down by Sun Records and told he couldn't sing. And Stephen King was told by a publisher that his writing was abysmal and not of interest to any rational person. How many others are told similar things, and believe them? But that's not God's way. God never encountered sin God couldn't redeem; God never met a life he didn't love; God never saw a tomb that he couldn't open. Nobody is a dead end. When Jesus looked at lepers, and tax collectors, and women at the well at noon, he didn't see dead ends. He saw all that could yet be. Jesus never gives up on us. Jesus never loses hope. Jesus never limits our tomorrows by our todays. Joab couldn't see that, and so he cut off a life before Absalom had a chance to find what he needed to reconcile and make peace.

Friends, being human, sometimes we must make tough decisions for self-care. We have to let harmful persons go from our sphere of influence. And that hurts. That is the sin and brokenness of our world. But never stop believing that God can redeem, rebirth, rehabilitate. Never stop praying for those lost in storm. There are far more redemption stories than there are stories of tragic falls. God bathes us in grace. We were made to change and grow. Redemption is God's norm, not God's exception. Don't be Joab – don't give up your faith in new life. Don't cut off possibilities, especially when our King still says, "deal gently", live kindly, love mercy, walk humbly.

And last, but certainly not least, there's David. If there is a more poignant portrayal of grief in scripture, I'm hard-pressed to name it. But the tragedy of David's story is that he doesn't recognize the value of relationship until it's too late. Did you notice how David refers to Absalom? The young man. That's what David calls him. Deal gently with the young man Absalom. How is it with the young man Absalom. Why does he not claim his son? Why does he wait to call Absalom his son until after he's already dead? How much of all this mess might have been avoided if David had been willing to weep, "O Absalom, my son" a year or two sooner? Regret is cold consolation, but that is what David has left.

Some say that King David wrote Psalm 130 in the wake of this incident. More modern scholars say no. There's no way to know for certain. But even if David didn't write it, the sentiments seem to reflect his grief. Out of the depths, I cry to you, O Lord. Whoever wrote this is one grieving deeply, but also carrying a burden of guilt for sin. They're holding onto a last thread of hope, praying for a glimmer of light on the horizon, anything that might redeem a situation that has deteriorated into ash. They cling to the love that Absalom can no longer find; the hope Joab has given up; the promise of God that is momentarily elusive but eternally certain somehow. David will never be entirely free of the culpability he bears for the events of that day. He will never be without the grief of a lost child in his heart. But he clings by faith to the notion that God can do something beyond it; something good in the midst of it. That regret, by God's grace, can become action that makes things better for another. And when God speaks to David's heart that Solomon will be king, David listens. He teaches Solomon, takes time, blesses him, and Solomon, though far from perfect, becomes known for his wisdom and his compassion. Which is a kind of redemption, I think.

Yesterday, David Marks passed from this world to the next. David was a man who, as best he could, dealt gently with others and with this earth. He probably would have been the first to tell you that he wasn't perfect, but unlike his biblical namesake, David did not leave with regrets. He had taken the time these past weeks to call family and old friends, and to say things that are sometimes hard to say. Things like Thank You and Forgive Me and I Love You. And by the time he left us yesterday, he was at peace, and in his wake, he leaves peace. And love. And hope. And the example of a life well lived. Thanks be to God. Amen.