

ABSALOM, ABSALOM
August 19, 2012
2 Samuel 18:5-9, 15, 31-33

We've spent so much time this summer talking of David and it's been wonderful to find that even over dinner at a friend's house, a casual meeting at the Lazy Beagle, or coffee at FLour Power, the story of David becomes part of the conversation. I think this is because he is shown in the Bible as the kind of character one finds in modern fiction, because, I suppose, he's the kind of character one finds in modern life. He's conflicted, self-involved, keeps secrets, though maybe not when he ought to, driven by guilt and vanity, all those characteristics that we use to analyze our friends and colleagues, our politicians and movie stars. The special thing about David is, of course, that he talks to God.

So when this passage in Scripture came around in the lectionary, it seemed as though we had to talk about it, had to say those words, "Oh my son, Absalom, my son, my son, Absalom, if only I had died in your place! Oh Absalom my son, my son!" Those words make us weep every time, they are so from the very depth of the soul.

Of course, it is for David and not for Absalom that we are weeping, for the story that takes us to Absalom's death and David's regrets, is no easy path. David's life is one of triumph, but it can also seem like a recurrent nightmare, with new details cropping up every now and then.

In his whole life, David would never recapture the glow of the good boy done well after his affair with Bathsheba and the subsequent death, murder really, of her husband Uriah.

We heard Ellen and Sally talk of how the prophet Nathan confronted David with his sin, of how speaking the word of the Lord, Nathan told David that the consequences of his sin would be played out in his own family. David

confessed his sin, and not only that, articulated his deep and heartfelt grief over having strayed from God's path, and Nathan told him that it was not God's plan that he should be killed. Now, in this passage, how it seems he wishes for that death.

Much had happened in the years since the prophet Nathan confronted David and they had had this conversation. And many, many complicated events occurred, so I will try to keep it simple.

David's eldest son, Amnon, had conceived a lust for his half-sister Tamar, daughter of David and Bathsheba and full sister to Absalom. After feigning illness to get her to come to his room, Amnon raped Tamar, and then turned her out of the house. She told her brother, Absalom, who told David. And David, though angry, could not bring himself to do anything about this. Absalom brooded over the wrongs that his half-brother had done his sister for a couple of years and eventually his brooding burst forth and he had his servants kill Amnon.

Now David learned of this too, of course, and again he could not bring himself to do anything about it. Absalom fled from Jerusalem and stayed away for several years. Upon petitioning to return, his wish was granted, though only under the condition that he may not see the face of the king, his father David. All this time, of course, David was tormented, as any decent, self-flagellating father would be, but still cannot seem to do anything about any of these family matters.

Absalom, we are told, was a very handsome and charismatic guy, "with no blemish in him," as the Scripture says, and with, it is pointed out, a very full head of hair, that was worth 200 shekels after his annual hair cut.

He used his talents to set himself up against David, to undercut him and to gradually begin to challenge his authority. Eventually, Absalom gathered an army and claiming to be the true king, forced his father to depart from

the city of Jerusalem. It was a true revolt of the next generation, and surely have seen this same revolt in many stories throughout history. The battle raged about the countryside and many people were killed. So, once again, David was in an ambiguous position. On the one hand, he was the ruler and must deal forcefully and effectively with anyone who challenged his authority. On the other hand, he was a father who mourned the breach with his son and did not want to see harm come to him. He called his military advisors and told them, "Deal gently for my sake with the young man Absalom." "Alas, victories are not won by dealing gently with the enemy."*

Now, the scriptural passage tells us that everyone including the soldiers knew they should not harm the prince, Absalom. If the soldiers captured Absalom they were to obey the king's order and not harm him.

The battle took place in the forest and surrounding countryside. The fighting was heavy with casualties on both sides. At one point in the battle Absalom unexpectedly met up with some servants of David. Trying to escape capture, Absalom rode away on a mule as fast as he could, but somehow he managed to get snagged by a low branch. Absalom was left dangling "between heaven and earth" as his mule continued without him. He was stuck and could not free himself. He was alone in the forest; his soldiers were not around to free him or protect him either. There he was defenseless in the heat of the battle. Footnotes in my Oxford Annotated Bible suggest that the mule was the royal mount of David and his sons, and thus Absalom's unseating is symbolic of his loss of the kingdom, just as his being caught by the head recalls his glorious hair and suggests that his pride was his downfall.

When Joab, the commanding officer heard that Absalom had been caught, he took matters into his own hands, despite the request from David, and drove spears into Absalom, after which he was joined by other soldiers in

the blood letting.

The victory belonged to David. The insurrection was over. Now David could reclaim his rightful place as king. One issue remained however. Who would tell David that his son was dead? Messengers bringing bad news to the king have been known to be killed. It was decided to send a foreigner to tell David of his son's demise, a foreigner who would be ignorant and therefore exempt from punishment. This was the Cushite, who told David, "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." When asked, the unknowing foreigner goes on to assure the King that Absalom has received the just desserts of those who would do harm against the King.

And there we have it. Down through the ages we can hear David cry out, "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you. O Absalom, my son, my son!" In that moment everything besides the death of his son became irrelevant, the battle, the rebellion, the throne, everything but his deep grief.

And he is not just grieving for his son, of course, but for himself.

Now he can no longer avoid facing the conundrum of his life. As a youth, David faced Goliath and the powers of the Philistines, powers that way surpassed his own, and triumphed, using only his own, home grown skills. As he achieved maturity and success though, he often sought to avoid that kind of confrontation. As his past became more complicated and compromised, it would not let him go. His fight with Saul, his sabotage of Uriah over Bathsheeba's pregnancy, his refusal to deal with the evil deeds and resentments of his children, all of these make Absalom's death something that can be laid at his own feet. "...if only I had died in your place," for surely I should have, he might have said. David talked with God, as we said, and God forgave him and persevered with him, as He had always said that he would.

But he did not counsel David, as we might have wished for, especially in our more counseling oriented days. We might have wished that David, instead of seeking forgiveness only from God, had been more forthright with those around him, that he might have saved Uriah rather than covering up his own transgressions, that he might have interceded in the matter of his son and daughter, Amnon and Tamar, that he might have kept Absalom at his side rather than letting him go off on a rampage. We might have wished that David had been more transparent and more accepting of his past.

But that was not David's way, and for that we have this fascinating window into the life of the times and the soul of a troubled man. For that we have many, many works of literature including Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*, in which the protagonist, seeking to establish a glorious dynasty, comes raging up against his own past, which will not allow him his goal, and wrestles him to the ground.

We have much to learn from a study of David, perhaps chief among them is a phrase that my husband loves to proffer every once in a while.

Appropriately, it comes from Faulkner - "The past is never dead. It's not even past."

*Forstberg, Linda R., *Sermons on the First Readings, Series 1, Cycle B*

