

2 Samuel 18:5-9, 15, 31-33

New Revised Standard Version

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.

And ten young men, Joab's armor-bearers, surrounded Absalom and struck him, and killed him.

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!"

One of the jobs of the king was to be a judge. People would come and ask for the king to solve disputes. A famous example is King Solomon with the baby. Do you remember that one? There were two mothers living in the same house, each the mother of an infant son. One of the babies sadly died and each claimed the remaining child as their own. Solomon called for a sword and declared his judgment. Each woman would receive half of the baby. One mother said that was a good idea because if she couldn't have the baby then no one else could either. The other mother begged Solomon, "Give the baby to her, just don't kill him!" King Solomon said that woman was the true mother, because she was willing to give up her baby if that was necessary to save its life.

In our scripture today we're going to hear about Absalom. Absalom is King David's son. Amnon and Absalom were half-brothers, David was their father. To give you a little background, Amnon raped Absalom's sister, Tamar, and their dad doesn't do anything about it. He's the king but he doesn't punish his son. Absalom is frustrated that David won't punish his half-brother Amnon so Absalom kills his half-brother. David forces Absalom into exile but then allows him to return in a few years.

A few years later, King David is doing one of his jobs as a king and judging disputes. Absalom sits outside at the city gates and approaches everyone who gets a negative judgment from King David. Absalom tells them that if he were king, he would have sided for them. Absalom parades through the streets and offers to take over his father's position as judge. Absalom organizes a coup.

It makes me think of people who present themselves as allies but behind the scenes are doing all that they can to undermine us. Every leader has experienced that, and I dare to say that each one of you has experienced that. In my first church as a pastor, I had someone who I thought was my greatest supporter. I painfully realized that was not the case. I remember when someone shared what that person had been saying about me. It wasn't Absalom level betrayal but it hurt just the same.

Absalom proclaims himself king, then he raises an army to fight his father, but it doesn't go well. In today's scripture we will hear how soundly Absalom is defeated, ultimately leading to his death. In Absalom's time, long hair was a sign of a warrior's strength. Absalom had so much hair that when he cut it each year, it weighed between 4-5 pounds. When Absalom is

riding on a horse, his hair gets caught in the tree. He is hanging between heaven and earth by his hair and David's soldiers don't have mercy on him.

READ SCRIPTURE. The Bible often teaches us things about God. But, sometimes the Bible just puts an issue in front of us on the table and says, any of y'all ever feel like this? This is one of those stories.¹ This is a story about the grief of a parent who has lost a child. Granted, David did orchestrate his son Absalom's death, but he is still plunged into despair. David says he would trade his life for the life of his child. David's son killed one of his other sons, led a coup against his father, and yet his dad still loves him.

It reminds me of King Theoden when he learns of his son Theodred's death in *The Lord of the Rings*. King Theoden says, "The young perish, the old linger... no parent should have to bury their child." You can feel David's anguish, he can only moan the name of his son over and over again. It is the unthinkable loss. David's heart is broken open with the death of his son. You could see this story as one of a parent who watches their child take a self-destructive path from which parental love cannot save them. As king, David tried to influence events asking his soldiers to deal gently with his son, but he is caught between his roles as father and king. Absalom is a traitor and there are consequences to his failed coup. As a king, David knows this, but as a father he has no power to bring his son back to life.

We make compromises in our life because we can't have it all. We have to choose between family and career. We feel pulled and we sometimes make the same wrong choices we see others make. When I was a pastor in England, Lee and I had only been married a year. We didn't have kids yet. I remember being at a retreat for new pastors and the District Chairman, a role similar to a Bishop, said something that transformed my outlook of how I wanted to be as a parent. He said that he had four children and he knew two of them because of the choices that he had made as a pastor. He had chosen the church and his job over his children. He wasn't home, he missed games, he missed family dinners, he was at meetings during bedtime. I didn't know when Lee and I were going to have children, but I knew that I didn't want to end up like this guy. I wanted to choose myself, I wanted to choose my spouse, I wanted to choose my children, and if possible, somehow balance trying to be the best pastor that I could be.

David used his power and violence to get what he wanted. Absalom modeled what he had seen his dad do right back to his dad. We model behavior and values that our children and other people imitate. Sometimes that is wonderful, but other times it points a mirror up to show us that which we want to change about ourselves. I wonder what might have been avoided if David's heart had overflowed with love and forgiveness at an earlier moment rather than with grief after his son's death.

Sometimes we get into this cycle of alienation with members of our family or with our friends, and we need to reach out and break that cycle before it comes to these tragic moments of grief. There are no quick fixes, no easy answers, but we know that God knows our agony and God's embrace is infinitely large. Life doesn't always have the happy ending. There are stories where the prodigal son doesn't come home and the waiting father's embrace is empty.

Last Sunday Tracy Wallace shared with me about one of our church members who has moved to Kansas, Lisa Reed. Lisa has recently been diagnosed with lung cancer. I remarked how unfair and Tracy said something amazing. Tracy said that she has stopped asking why because asking why is unproductive.

Our lives are gifts, and we have to decide how to best use each day that we are given. If you have a job and a family you have to decide how to divide your time. We can't do it all. And

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/podcasts/796-11th-sunday-after-pentecost-ord-19b-aug-8-2021>

every night we have to look at ourselves in the mirror. We may make small compromises about our personal behavior, our priorities, our definition of right and wrong. However, we don't want to compromise too much and feel like we're stuck and we can't get back to who we are.

Another way we can look at it is maybe life isn't about making the perfect choice, but about looking harder for the holiness in the life that we have. Jesus took simple bread and juice and transformed it to be a taste of heaven for us. We have the demands of our jobs, social expectations, or demands from our families. We may feel stuck by our relationships and past decisions and feel like we didn't make the right choice the first time. But we are connected to heaven because we know that the spark of the holy is with us always. We can see that spark that God has created in every living thing and it makes it a little easier to love the world and to love ourselves.

We can try to gain a little more joy out of the job that doesn't satisfy. If we don't get enough time with our families, we can make the time we do have a little more meaningful. We can treat our relationships with a little more honor even when they are difficult. We can look at our past mistakes and treat them as opportunities to grow and understand, not just as opportunities for regret. We can look at our lives this way, just like Jesus looks at bread and wine and sees heaven and tells us to remember him by doing likewise. Thanks be to God, Amen.