

## “The Waiting Soul”

Let me begin by saying with only a little irony how good it is to be back from vacation. One of the best things about going away is seeing home in a new light upon return. Last week as I sat in a pew at 9:00, I found myself profoundly grateful for this community of faith. As I listened to Matt’s wonderful sermon and was ministered to by all my able colleagues, I was gratified to have this wonderful team with which to work... and I was grateful for their willingness to take on something so challenging as the story of David... and I was grateful for a congregation willing to engage this story at the theological depth and emotional intensity it demands of all of us.

A line from a movie haunts me as I contemplate the next chapter of this remarkable story. It’s in *A Few Good Men* when Jack Nicholson shouts, “The truth! You can’t handle the truth!” The people who wrote the Bible evidently thought otherwise. We get an astoundingly unblinking, unvarnished account of the life of King David. But the Bible story continually returns to the deeper truth that matters most: the truth regarding the ways of God with us. We can get so lost in the details sometimes that we forget that ultimately this is a story about the relationship between people and God.

Last week, Nathan the prophet confronted David with the truth of David’s lustful abuse of power in his adultery with Bathsheba and having her husband Uriah murdered. Astonishingly, David admits his guilt and repents before God. And he is forgiven. Nevertheless the consequences of his actions will continue to reverberate throughout his life. He is forgiven, but he is still accountable. There is the reality, for example, that Bathsheba is still pregnant.

She gives birth to a son. Nathan the prophet declares that the son will die as punishment for David’s sin. (Dealing with the justice or injustice of *that* would require a sermon in itself.) David pleads with God for the child’s life. For seven days he prostrates himself before God, praying day and night that the child be spared. But he dies. And when he dies, David, instead of publicly mourning the death, cleans himself up, worships and then goes back to work. Challenged about this he says there’s no point to praying now: the

child is dead. Then he says, poignantly, “I shall go to him, but he will not return to me.” (12:15b-23)

The focus for now turns to some of David’s children by some of his other wives, of which there were many.

Three key figures emerge. First in line for the throne is son Amnon, born at Hebron to David and Ahinoam (3:2); Absalom is David’s, son by Maacah; and Tamar is a daughter by the same wife, making her Absalom’s full sister and Amnon’s half sister.

In a story we were never told in Sunday School, Amnon becomes obsessed with his half sister, Tamar. He connives to be alone with her, tries to woo her but ultimately rapes her and then dismisses her with contempt, effectively ruining her life. Her full brother, Absalom, is enraged. Their father David is angered by the event, but he does nothing to enact justice, perhaps because he is morally compromised by his own indiscretions. For personal reasons or for political ones, Absalom plots revenge. It takes him two years, but he finally gets Amnon isolated and has his servants kill Amnon for what he did to his sister Tamar. After the murder, Absalom flees.

Absalom dominates the next portion of the story. He is beautiful: “from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head there was no blemish in him.” (14:23) His crowning glory was his beautiful hair, which he cut once a year because it was so thick and long. He grew two hundred shekels—five pounds of it—every year... a real rock star. He was athletic and winsome. In fact, descriptions of him remind us—by design, I am sure—of the young David. He is also vain and fiercely ambitious. He needs his father’s attention and love; but he is also disdainful of David’s inaction when his sister was raped. This is a dangerous emotional cocktail.

And David has issues with Absalom, too. After three years of grieving for Amnon, the son Absalom murdered, David’s fatherly yearning turns to Absalom. But he won’t say so. After all, David is still the king, and Absalom is still guilty of murder. David’s pride and position will not permit him to reach out to his son.

As the estrangement continues it becomes more and more bizarre. Absalom is finally permitted to come back to Jerusalem. But David still won’t receive him as a son. He’s home, but he’s not home; he’s there, but he’s not there. David leaves him hanging, a foreshadowing of things to come. They go on like this for two years. Finally, Absalom acts out: he gets David’s attention by burning the field of David’s Chief of Staff, Joab. There

is a brief scene in which Absalom comes before David and prostrates himself in submission, and David the king officially kisses him, but David the father does not embrace him.

All this is too little, too late. Absalom has already begun a career for himself rallying dissenters. He senses David's vulnerability among those who come to the king for justice and go away disappointed. The king is too busy, too distracted, perhaps even too bored to do this important work of administering justice as it ought to be done; and there is always the reality that those who don't get their way think themselves wronged. Absalom is there for them: commiserating with them, siding with them, and assuring them that things would certainly be different if he were king. He musters an entourage: chariots and runners—sort of the equivalent of black SUV's and a Secret Service detail to announce his movements about the city and create a stir: the Crown Prince is on the move! His good looks, ambition and political instincts help him cash in with anybody who is tired of David... and lots of people are. At some point nobody can identify, David turned a corner. He was no longer the fresh, young, energetic alternative to crazy old Saul. One day David became The Man. And by now David has even come to think of himself as The Man.

We've already had repentance, remorse, rape and revenge. Next comes full blown rebellion. Absalom goes to Hebron, where David had been crowned king<sup>1</sup>, and proclaims himself king, gathering all the dissidents to him. Some of David's closest advisors defect to Absalom, playing a high stakes political game. The young man gathers remarkable strength and prepares to make his move. But his big mistake is to underestimate the old man.

I had misremembered this part of the story, thinking that David had grown aloof and distracted. But as the political threat mounts, his old shrewdness returns, and he calls in all his political debts and calls on all his strategic abilities. He infiltrates Absalom's movement at the highest levels with advisors who only pretend to defect. He utilizes priests and public officials as part of his intelligence network. And he arranges for Absalom to get some really bad advice. Rather than a quick strike excursion to execute only the king, Absalom opts for a large scale civil war to exterminate David and all who are loyal to him: big mistake.

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<sup>1</sup> There was also an earlier, private anointing near Bethlehem in I Samuel 16.

David actually evacuates Jerusalem, mourning as he goes. But he began as a guerilla fighter in the Judean hills, and he is comfortable in that mode, on the move and buying time, carefully organizing his military response to Absalom. Meanwhile, Absalom occupies Jerusalem and Jerusalem occupies him. He relishes the trappings of power, publicly possessing all his father's wives in an ostentatious demonstration of his youthful virility and his utter disdain for the king. But while he's making whoopee, David is making ready.

Finally the civil war comes to a head. David divides his forces into three armies. As they go forth to battle he stands forth to encourage them, and pointedly orders his commanders to quell the rebellion, but not to harm Absalom! "Deal gently for my sake with the young man Absalom." This is a lot to ask. Fight my war, but don't deal with the cause of it. King and father are all tangled up in one another here. David may again be the head of state and shrewd strategist; but he is still paralyzed by the personal mess he can't get in order.

The account of the battle is anti-climactic. Absalom's troops are routed and scattered. They flee into a forest where many of them starve: "the forest claimed more victims that day than the sword." And one of the forest's victims is Absalom. Of all things he is hung up by his hair. Riding a mule, symbol of the office to which he aspires, he gets tangled up and the mule goes on, leaving him to twist in the breeze. "Between heaven and earth," the text says (18:9). But he is also hanging between life and death, between son and rebel, between the noble avenger of his sister and the ambitious, self-righteous poser.

The king's clear order was not to kill Absalom. But when General Joab finds him there, he has no patience with the king's grief when so many other families have also been brought to grief by this rebel. He kills Absalom.

It's a great victory, and David is remade as a king and undone as a father. He is immobilized by grief. Five times in one verse he calls Absalom, "my son": "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!" Yet David couldn't bring himself to call Absalom "my son" while he was alive; at least not to his face. It's a wrenching scene. Who could have imagined all this?

At this point we're almost numb, and can rightly wonder why any of this might matter to us, or why we even have these stories in the Bible. But

remember: in and through all of this is the consistent claim that David is God's Chosen. There was a covenant with Abraham—who, as we saw last summer, is a mixed bag in his own right. Then there was a covenant with the people at Sinai, Moses and the Ten Commandments. But now there is a covenant with Israel through David's royal line. So let's be clear: it isn't because of David—his beauty or righteousness or ability. It is because of God.

David lives with God's promise in many different ways. But always the story returns to who David is before God. He accepts his guilt. He accepts his punishment. He doesn't blame God for what happens to him. He sees, eventually, the implications of his actions and inactions. He lives at every moment in the tension between who he is and what he's called to be.

There is a wonderful Russian proverb that says, "Pray to God and row for shore." David does both with all his heart.

This story also matters because we can see ourselves all through it. There's the relationship between David and his adversaries and mentors. He disdains Goliath as an "uncircumcised Philistine"; and then he himself pursues power with no regard for God and behaves as though no part of his anatomy were dedicated to God. He resolves not to be Saul, and then grows to become very like him at times, haunted by his past, erratic in his behavior, unreliable in his authority. And Absalom, too, grows up to be his father; or rather to try to become his father.

So are all of us haunted by adversaries and by mentors, becoming what we once disdained and looking in the mirror one day to see our parents looking back at us. We, too, wrestle with having been chosen by God: not to be king of Israel, but to be for God the someone that only we can be. And as David prays to God and rows for shore, we are challenged to pray as though it all depended on God and to act as though it all depended on us.

"My soul waits for the LORD," the psalmist intones. But the soul that waits upon God is not passive and inert, but attentive and receptive. And ultimately, for all of us, everything comes down to who we are before God, no matter on what stage the drama of our lives is acted out. Bitter grief, soulful prayers, joyous triumphs, broken relationships... and God is in and through it all. We tell the story of David not because it is his story, but because it is ours, as well.

Amen

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