

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church

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“This Mess We’re In”

II Samuel 13-19; Ephesians 4:25-5:2

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Are you sick of summer yet? Not only do you have this drought and horrible heat... and not only are your teenagers up and out late keeping you from your sleep... and not only are there no patterns and no childcare/school...

Not only is there all that... but you have to come to church and hear me talk about David every week because the Lectionary won't let us out of Samuel. It's like the church insisting that we pay attention to all the story, as sad, as obnoxiously sad as it gets.

We're forced to watch it unravel.

We have to watch...

And most of us can't wait for fall to get here.

But for now, we're in second Samuel and while it may be familiar to a lot of you I just want to give you the narrative of these final chapters. I just think we need to hear it all unfolding, unraveling, and going to hell in a hand basket.

Remember, we left David last week grieving the death of the son he and Bathsheba had... And then they have another son, Solomon, nicknamed Jedidiah by God Himself, which means, “The Lord loves.”

“Meanwhile”, the writer says, General Joab (G.I. Joab) has been fighting the Ammonites and David gets his army together and gets in on the action. They captured their big city, plundered it, and listen to this little line from our author, **“He brought out the people who were there, consigning them to labor with saws and with iron picks and axes, and he made them work at brick making.”**

And his Jewish audience is thinking... **“Gosh this is familiar where have we heard that before... slaves making bricks.”** The oppressed tend to become the oppressors... right?

Then the story turns back to David's household. He has lots of wives, remember. (This is before the days of Biblical Family Values.) And so he has lots of sons and daughters who are step brother and sisters.

And one of his sons, Amnon is obsessed with one of his daughters, Tamar. And Amnon cannot control his lust and he rapes her... and then he despises her. And when Absalom, her brother heard... he was, of course, enraged.

And he takes his time but eventually he gets his revenge... He gets Amnon drunk and orders his men to kill him. And they do... so of course, Absalom is now in David's doghouse, banished. There's a rift.

Joab watches all this going on and tries to do a little matchmaking, some fence mending. He sends a woman to David... using the ploy that she needs his help, his advice, and some jurisprudence.

So she tells him her story. **“King David, it's just awful... I have two sons and one day they got in a fight, you know how boys are. And one of them killed the other and now everyone wants to kill my other boy and, in a way, I know he deserves it... but could you please help me? I don't want to lose him, too.”**

David jumps on it, **“Don't worry, ma'am, as the Lord lives, I'll issue an order saying he is not to be touched.”**

And the woman then does her little Nathan, prophetic thing... **“You're the man, King... why are you keeping your son away? He's still your son.”**

And then listen to her wisdom, her gospel word.

“Like water spilled on the ground, which cannot be recovered, so we must die. But that is not what God desires. Rather, he devises ways so that a banished person does not remain banished forever.”

Wow... we're like spilled water, you can't get it back, no hope for recovery... but God has other ideas.

And David gets it... he invites Absalom back to the city and Absalom moves home... but this is no Prodigal Son story. David doesn't kill the fatted calf and have a party. He does what we'd do... gives him the silent treatment... and it goes on for two years.

Two years, Dad doesn't talk to son...

And finally Absalom has just had it and he sends a message to the king saying, **“Look, either talk to me or kill me.”**

And David wilts and invites him to the palace and kisses him and all is well... it seems... but no.

Absalom's face is still moist with David's kiss and the writer goes right into Absalom's conspiracy. He gets up every morning and goes and sits out at the city gate... And as folks enter the gate having business with the king he does a bit of triage.

“O let's not bother the king with this little dispute over a donkey. I'm his son and I'll handle this.”

“You need to talk to the king about your taxes? ... Your property assessment was too high?.... Let's see that, I'll just cut that in half.”

“What, you were denied your Medicare for your medication?,... That's appalling, I'll have my people take care of that immediately.”

This went on for sometime... four years.

Absalom kissing babies...

Absalom standing up for the oppressed, empathizing.

“I feel your pain.”

Absalom had charisma, and looks... The author says, **“In all of Israel there was not a man so highly praised for his handsome appearance. From his head to the sole of his foot there was no blemish.”** He was perfect... Had this huge head of beautiful hair that he was really proud of and only cut once a year... the author makes a point of saying.

He combs it every morning and he looks sharp and kingly everyday as he heads back to the gate to work the crowd and press the flesh.

Absalom making friends...

Building bridges... networking...

And the writer says, **“and so, he stole the hearts of the people of Israel.”**

Then he devises a plan to get out of town. **“Dad, I promised God that if he'd get me back to Jerusalem, I'd someday return to Hebron and worship him... I better go fulfill that vow.”**

And of course... what god-fearing parent is going to say, **“No, you can't go worship and fulfill your vow to God.... No more Bible study for you young lady.”** Of course he says yes.

So, Absalom goes and takes 200 Cracker Jack soldiers unwittingly with him and David's chief of staff... Ahithophel... Y'all remember him, don't you... Ahithophel?

When he gets there he incites everyone to start chanting that **“Absalom is king of Israel...”** and just like that the coup is over and done with.

David sees the handwriting on the wall and so he flees with his army and all his household. Everyone is watching and weeping as he heads out of town. Just like that, King David is homeless again.

And he comes upon some descendants of Saul... who are kicking him while he's down. They're still mad about being displaced. So, they're throwing rocks at him and yelling insults.

“Hek Meth Ta Yowl.” Which is ancient Hebrew for **“Your mother wears army boots and your father wears panty hose.”**

They're insulting him and saying, **"You had all this coming... God is paying you back for what you did to Saul."**

One of David's bodyguards says, **"You want me to go cut his head off and shut him up."**

David says, **"No, it's just a Benjamite. I mean my own son is trying to take my life, what do I care if he says my father wears panty hose. Besides, maybe he's right. Maybe God is punishing me for unseating Saul."**

So they go on with the Benjamites still hurling rocks and insults. **"Don't come back or we'll taunt you a second time."** Eventually David sends a spy back to Jerusalem with the ark. Sort of a James Bondstein... this guy goes back and he's sort of a double agent. He tells Absalom that he's on his side now.

And Absalom is sealing the dealing back in the city of David. He takes ten of David's concubines up to the rooftop at the advice of his chief of staff, Ahithophel... and sleeps with them the writer says, **"in the sight of all Israel."** Some sort of political consummation... apparently.

So, he's on a roll, and Ahithophel says you need to strike while the iron is hot and go after your dad. The double agent, James Bondstein, says, **"You might not want to do that... David's soldiers are the best and what if you lose and lose all this momentum."**

Absalom decides to wait.

And the big showdown is avoided for just a little while. And he stays there in the palace eating grapes and sleeping on the roof with his dad's harem while David, the real king, is out hiding, getting messages everyday and reports from James Bondstein.

Ahithophel gets so upset that Absalom didn't follow his guidance that he commits suicide.

Well, the big battle can't be avoided forever... and there is a showdown. David's guys versus Absalom's... David tells everyone before they leave for battle... **"Don't hurt Absalom... Be gentle with him for my sake."**

And David wants to go but they won't let him so he stays behind and there's this horrible battle in a forest somewhere. Thousands are killed and David's warriors, who are like the Navy Seals or Army Rangers or Green Berets... win.

And Absalom is fleeing on a donkey in this forest, when his hair gets caught in a tree.

And, for sure, the writer wants us to see the irony. His vanity traps him... narcissistic pride... holds him captive... hanging there looking stupid, calling for his donkey to come back. **"Here donkey... nice donkey..."**

Of course David's soldiers find him and go report. **"We saw Absalom in the forest... You aren't going to believe this... but the guy is just hanging there by his hair."**

G.I Joab says, **"Well, why didn't you kill him?"**

"We're not touching the king's son."

So, Joab does the deed and orders his men to maul him and bury him under some stones... and word gets back to David and he weeps...

Absalom... Absalom...

And the sad story continues on through Samuel... always the politics... always the maneuvering. More watching the back... more plundering, more punishment and revenge and scapegoating. It's just a mess. It's a nightmare.

And plenty of us are thinking, **"Yeah, and it's all David's fault."** And I know to some extent that's true... but not true enough. Because there's plenty of blame to go around... and more sin than you can shake a stick at.

Lust and greed...

Anger and bitterness and jealousy.

Manipulation... abuse of power...

Pride... the hunger for significance.

It's all there, everything that makes a good soap opera; it's all there in the middle of this story, making it a disaster. It's the same stuff that makes any story a disaster. It's so easy to point a finger at David or Absalom... but he they're not alone.

It's so easy to point fingers at the Middle East right now, where everything is such an obvious disaster. The same sinful stuff is still going on. It's clear there... Sin is easy to spot in the headlines... not so easy in our lives, but it's the same stuff there, too.

Evagrius (one of the earliest spiritual teachers in the Church) said there were some basic issues... he called them thoughts, that tripped up every human being... stuff that is at the root of it all.

Gluttony, lust, greed, despondency, anger, not caring, or trying, needing to be esteemed, jealousy, pride... It's all the stuff that drives the plot in II Samuel... and it's the same stuff that drives the conflict and causes someone to heave a grenade in the Middle East... And it's the same stuff that can drive us and our stories.

That's what Jesus is trying to say in the Sermon on the Mount. **"It's your heart that is the problem. If you lust, it's the same as committing adultery. It's coming from the same place. If you hate someone... it's like murder. ... Same stuff."**

And we have this painful, obnoxiously painful story in second Samuel... really in the entire Old Testament. Page after page after page. We take a step or two forward and ten back. Same stuff... Greed... same stuff... abuse of power and injustice. Same ol' stuff.

In the same way our summer in Samuel makes us weary... I think the long biblical story... this never-ending conflicted canon, wants to make us so sick that we're ready to hear something different... We're so sick of that same sinful song and broken dance that when we finally get to Matthew's gospel we're ready. **"Please!!!!!!!"**

Of course, it's not just in Samuel or in the canon where they keep making the same mistakes and stumping their big toes on the same big sin.

It's in our stories. Is your pain not familiar? Do you not frustrate yourself in the same ways? Do you ever just want to yell at yourself and say, **"PLEASE!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!"**

Don't you ever???

Same pride in the way...

Same need to be right and in control...

Same feelings getting hurt all the time...

Same fears running us...

... And maybe making us sick enough that we're ready for something else. That's when the gospel enters our stories. When we've got to have something else.

The Lectionary wants us to see the mess we're in and be real sick of it. It wants us to see our need... and our hunger so that we're ready to hear the gospel... And we read it in John, about Jesus being bread that feeds that hunger at deeper levels. We've taken the reality in... into our center. That's the good news.

And the Lectionary gives us a calling as God's people to live differently on the other side of that. We don't have to keep rewriting and reliving the same soap operas over and over. Listen to Paul's challenge to the Ephesians.

So I tell you this... (after he's told them about the mystical reality of Christ with them) that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. They are darkened in the inner mind and separated from the life of God... because of their hard hearts.... That's not the life you learned....

You were taught to put off your old self, which is corrupted by deceitful desires... (all those thoughts) Everyone listen: ...*You were taught to be made new in your minds* (inner beings) *and to put on a new self, which is created to be like God...* (your created capacity... made to be like God)

Then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger... Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear.

And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, (don't block it). Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. (From 4: 17-5:2)

“In its deepest understanding,” some one has written, **“The Church is nothing other than the world in the course of transfiguration, the world that in Christ reflects the light of paradise.** (Olivier Clement, The Roots of Christian Mysticism)

We're just the world... on its way to transformation. The same stuff that's out there is in here... only so is Christ and so, we can become a redeemed template for the world. In here, we're what can be, out there. What happens in the church doesn't stay in the church.

Out there... the world it seems intent on blowing itself up. It's the same stuff... Anger, bitterness, power abused... need for significance... pride... stupidity.... Same stuff, only Absalom and David are more dangerous now, aren't they?

And we're involved, we have to be... But please understand that none of it will ever end until people are transformed from within. It must be solved by those living at a different level.

This world will never be perfect and we shouldn't expect that... the cross tells us it'll always be messy but the mess will only be dealt with in redemptive ways by those who are being made whole.

“The church is the world in the course of transfiguration.”

“We have been taught to put off the old self...

and put on the new one, created to be like God.”

Salvation is not just about you getting the right propositions into your gray matter... where you think the right things about Jesus so God has to let you in someday. Salvation is about the world, it's about all of us, coming to the place, growing up enough that we don't keep reliving the sad saga of Second Samuel.

Are you tired of this mess we're in?

Christ in you, is the hope of glory.

Christ in us... Amen.