

27 June 2021

Absalom! Absalom!
2 Samuel 13-19; Psalm 3

At last Israel defeated the Ammonites, their enemy across the Jordan River, and for the first time in generations, the land could rest. King David had driven back the Philistines, defeated the Moabites, Ammonites, and even the Syrians to the north. He had made treaties with the kings of the Tyre and Sidon. Israel was at peace, and David could go back to his family.

Or, I should say, *families*. Like most Ancient Near Eastern kings, David had multiple wives, and when that happens, the wives and their children tend to form separate groups. After all, David had a big house. There was his wife Ahinoam and her son Amnon, David's oldest. Then there was Abigail, and her son Chileab. Chileab is only mentioned once, though, so he may have died young. Then there was Maacah, mother of David's third son, Absalom, and a daughter named Tamar. David's fourth son, Adonijah, was the child of Haggith, and then there was Bathsheba. The child that Bathsheba and David had conceived when she was still married to Uriah the Hittite died in infancy, but after she married David, she had other sons. One of them she named Solomon. Keep those names in mind: those were the important princes, in birth order: Amnon, Absalom, Adonijah, and Solomon.

And the crown prince was Amnon. When Amnon became a young man he was filled with desire for a beautiful young girl . . . his half-sister Tamar. I know. Ew. But this wasn't all that uncommon in ancient Israel. Abraham's wife Sarah was his half-sister. But don't compare Amnon with Abraham: Amnon wasn't interested in a lifelong commitment. He just thought Tamar was hot. So Amnon worked out a plan. He faked illness, and when his father David came to check on him, he said faintly, "I think . . . I think I might feel better if my sister Tamar came and tended to me." David was, shall we say, not always a perceptive father. He sent Tamar to Amnon, who raped her. Sorry. There's no nice way of putting that, nor should there be. Tamar fought and begged, but Amnon forced her, then threw her out. The text says, "Then Amnon hated her exceedingly."

This would make anyone angry, or should, but it especially enflamed Tamar's full brother, Absalom. He went furiously to his father the king, demanding justice. David was angry, too, but he did nothing. Amnon was his heir! Absalom realized he'd have to punish Amnon himself. So, two full years after Tamar's rape, Absalom invited all his princely brothers to a big party – at a site outside Jerusalem. He served them all plenty of food and wine, and when they were drunk, he leaned in Amnon's face and said, "Guess who I saw yesterday wearing sackcloth and ashes, as she has for two years now. Remember my sister Tamar? I hope so." Then Absalom killed Amnon. While everyone was screaming and running, he leaped on the mule he rode everywhere and fled to the neighboring country of Geshur, where his maternal grandfather was king. Once again, David was angry, but did nothing. Absalom had placed himself in exile, and David simply allowed that self-imposed sentence to stand. This man who was swift and decisive on the battlefield was quite different at home.

Now the exiled Absalom had a friend in David's court, sort of a kindred spirit: David's nephew and commander-in-chief, Joab. Joab had always preferred Absalom to that weasel Amnon, and as you may recall from last week, Joab had no problem with murder. He operated under the same code of family honor that had inspired Absalom, and Joab wanted Absalom back.

So, after Absalom had lived in exile for a couple of years, Joab hired an old woman to go before David with a story.

“My lord king!” said the old woman, when they led her to the throne, “I come seeking mercy from you.”

“Say on.”

“I had two sons, two strong, dutiful, but, alas, hot-headed sons.” The woman sighed. “Their tempers were their undoing. They got in a fight, and one killed the other. He is guilty; I do not pretend otherwise. But it was a heedless act of passion. Now the rest of the family insists that he be stoned to death in punishment, but then I will have no son left to care for me in my old age. My king, I ask a pardon for my son.”

David nodded. “Indeed, it is more important to preserve life than to take it. Your son is pardoned, that he may care for you.”

“Thank you, my king. May I ask one more thing?”

“Say on.”

“Why do you show mercy to me and my son, but not to your own, who slew his brother in an act of passion? If you can pardon my son, why can you not do so to Absalom?”

David gazed at her thoughtfully. “Joab put you up to this, didn’t he?”

“Maybe.”

“Fine. Tell Joab he can bring Absalom back to Jerusalem, but he’s not to come into my presence.”

Joab, listening from the next room, burst in. “Why not? What’s wrong with Absalom?”

“You mean other than murdering his brother?”

“You’re getting all stuffy about murder now? Remember Uriah?”

“I was wrong,” David said grimly, “and I repented before God. When Absalom repents before God, let me know.”

“So repenting makes everything all better? David, you’re a good king, but sometimes you make no sense at all.”

David stood firm, though, and since Absalom had no intention of repenting of anything, he and his father remained estranged even after Absalom returned. Before long, Absalom was working on his next plan. On days when David was scheduled to hear cases of law, Absalom went to the front gates to meet the Israelites coming with their claims. He would ask about people’s cases, then sigh. “Oh, dear. I’m afraid you’ll get nothing from this king. He’s already turned down three cases like yours. Now, things would be different if I were on the throne. I’ve always had a heart for the common people. Absalom. Right for Jerusalem; right for you.”

Well, as we all know, when you repeat a lie often enough, people start to believe it. Especially, it turns out, when the person repeating the lies is a handsome young man with a full head of hair. And he *was* handsome, and he did have nice hair: long, lustrous, full-bodied. He

wore it like the crown that he was tired of waiting for. He gathered a following – an honor guard of fifty young men who ran alongside his chariot everywhere he went – and kept turning the hearts of the people away from his father. Before long, Absalom had attracted enough of a following to form an army. When he was confident that he had enough, he slipped back out of town, mustered his troops, and began marching on Jerusalem, in rebellion against his own father.

David was caught flat-footed, with no time to rally his own men. He had no choice but to flee Jerusalem. When he left his capital, it was like the old days in the wilderness, running from Saul, and he barely had as many men as he had had back then. Some of them were the same ones, in fact. Joab went with him and Joab's brother Abishai – Joab liked Absalom, but his first loyalty was always to David – but not many of the younger men. They were all rallying to Absalom. Things did not look good for David. As David and his men reached the outer gate, another old friend met him, the priest Abiathar, bringing the Ark of the Covenant. "What's this, Abiathar?"

"You're the king," said Abiathar. "We're going with you."

"No, Abiathar. Stay here. The Lord is Israel's God, not mine. If I die tomorrow, let me at least know that God will still be worshiped in Jerusalem."

Abiathar returned to the city, and David and his men went on. Before long, though, they met another man, a Benjaminite named Shimei who was related to Saul. "Hey, David! Yoo hoo! How does it feel? Thbbbt! Ooh! Did thomebody thteal your throne? Where have I heard that story before? Oh, I remember! Somebody took Saul's throne. Who was that, anyway?" Between taunts, Shimei threw stones at David.

Joab's brother Abishai said, "Can I kill him, David? Please?"

"No, Abishai. Do you think I care about his words? My son's trying to kill me. What do I care about the ravings of that dog. Leave him alone."

David and his men escaped, and soon they were weaving their way among the dry gullies and caves of the wilderness of Judah. Absalom marched into Jerusalem, claimed it triumphantly. Then came his first decision as king. Should he pursue David and attack before he could regroup, or should he wait and gather his own forces? In the end, he decided to wait and muster an army too large for even a wily old guerrilla fighter like his father to defeat. His hesitation may have saved David's life.

The armies of David and Absalom met in a place called the Forest of Ephraim, but David wasn't there. Joab and Abishai and David's other commanders refused to let David himself lead the troops: "We're fighting for you, David. If you die in battle, we fight in vain. You stay behind the lines."

Reluctantly, David agreed, making only one request: "Please. Tell the men. Don't hurt my son. Don't hurt Absalom. I don't care what he's done to me; I love him."

It was a rout. David's seasoned men demolished Absalom's raw troops, scattering them in every direction. As for Absalom, he faced an even worse indignity than defeat. Fleeing on his mule through the forest, he got his head stuck in a tree branch and just hung there, unable to free himself. One of David's soldiers saw him there and reported it to Joab.

“Well? Did you kill him?” Joab demanded.

“No, my lord. The king said not to hurt his son.”

Joab rolled his eyes and muttered, “Idiot.” Then he went to where Absalom hung.

“Joab, thank God it’s you. Get me down.”

“Can’t do that, Absalom.”

“Joab, I’ve always liked you.”

“And I’ve always liked you, Absalom. You would have been a great king. All David’s gifts without your father’s tiresome conscience and all that blasted psalm-singing.”

“Then get me down. We can work something out. I’ll apologize to my father and you –”

“It’s too late, Absalom. You shouldn’t have taken up arms against the family.”

Then Joab drove a spear into Absalom’s heart. Then a second. Then a third.

A messenger from Joab brought word of the victory to David, but all David could say was, “And my son? How is Absalom?”

“May all my lord’s enemies be as Absalom,” the messenger replied.

So it was that as David’s victorious troops returned to camp, David was in his room wailing, “Absalom! Absalom! My son, my son!”

Joab slammed open the door. “Get out here, David! Stop this now!”

“You don’t understand! He’s my son!”

“Oh, I understand, all right. We all understand. We understand that you’d be fine if we were all dead and Absalom alive! I swear to you, if you don’t wash your face and get out here to the men who risked their lives for you, you won’t have an army in the morning!”

David did as Joab said, and the next morning, they marched back to Jerusalem. As they traveled, a man met them. It was Shimei the Benjaminite, bowing deeply. “My lord the king, I hope I didn’t say anything to you that you might have thought disrespectful in any way. If so, I do apologize.”

Abishai snarled, “*Now* can I kill him?”

David looked up, and his eyes were old. “What is it with you and Joab and killing? Don’t you see that for every killing, a thousand new pains appear? Peace cannot be bought with others’ blood. I should know. I have shed blood, and I will never know peace again. Shimei, as God has been gracious to me today, I will be gracious to you. Go home. Go in peace.”

And David returned to Jerusalem to rule there until his death. Counting all the years of his reign, the Bible says he ruled for forty years. A man of war, with the scars to prove it, on both his body and his spirit. A man of peace, learned the hard way. A man of weakness and strength, of sin and repentance. And through it all, in spite of it all, somehow still a man of God. In that is our hope.

We read Psalm 3.

A Psalm of David, when he fled from his son Absalom.

¹ *O Lord, how many are my foes!*

Many are rising against me;

² *many are saying to me,*

'There is no help for you in God.'

³ *But you, O Lord, are a shield around me,
my glory, and the one who lifts up my head.*

⁴ *I cry aloud to the Lord,
and he answers me from his holy hill.*

⁵ *I lie down and sleep;
I wake again, for the Lord sustains me.*

⁶ *I am not afraid of tens of thousands of people
who have set themselves against me all around.*

⁷ *Rise up, O Lord!
Deliver me, O my God!*

*For you strike all my enemies on the cheek;
you break the teeth of the wicked.*

⁸ *Deliverance belongs to the Lord;
may your blessing be on your people!*