

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

5 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.

6 So the army went out into the field against Israel; and the battle was fought in the forest of Ephraim. 7 The men of Israel were defeated there by the servants of David, and the slaughter there was great on that day, twenty thousand men. 8 The battle spread over the face of all the country; and the forest claimed more victims that day than the sword.

9 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.

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

31 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.” 32 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.”

33 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!”

## UNDERSTANDING SIN

Calvin Coolidge, the 30<sup>th</sup> president of the United States, a man of few words supposedly attended church one Sunday. His wife did not attend, but asked him when he returned what the sermon was about.

Coolidge responded sin. When prompted to elaborate he responded, “He was against it.”

Reporters who loved to write about the taciturn nature of the president asked Coolidge about this story, and he replied, “The story would have been funnier if it were true.”

Even if Coolidge didn’t say it, the story is true. We talk about sin a lot in the church, and we are against it. But, we don’t say much more.

Why are we against sin? Do we just want to spoil everyone’s fun? Do we want to be judgmental? Do we want to poke our nose into someone else’s business?

If we have an inadequate understanding of sin, we will have an inadequate understanding of grace. And that’s why we need to say more about sin than just being against it. We have to understand the nature of sin and why we find it so hard to avoid.

Now when most people think of sin they think of the Ten Commandments and rightly so. God, in an act of grace, gave His people the Commandments to keep them out of trouble. In Proverbs we read, “Keep my commandments and live.” (Proverbs 4:4; 7:2)

But, the history of God’s people is (by and large) a history of sin. The story of the Bible is about how many people failed God. It is about lives that are broken and twisted by sin. It’s about how they didn’t use the law as a means of grace but as a stumbling block.

Now, why do we want to read that story? The story of sin and grace in the Bible helps us understand our own story. You see sin is complex. If we could just say “no” to sin we would do it.

But, as the prophet Isaiah put it, “I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips.” In other words, sin is pervasive. It is a part of everyone’s story. “All have sinned and fall short ... “ (Romans 3:23) and that includes us.

And the sin we commit today influences our future. One sin leads to another. Sin truly is a tangled web that we ourselves weave.

SIN IN THE ROYAL FAMILY

That's what our lesson for today is about. It's a history of sin. It's the story of how sin brought down the royal family in the time of King David.

David is an important person in the history of God's people. The Bible tells us David was a man after God's own heart. David was literally a giant killer whose honor and bravery were beyond measure.

Jesus was from the line of David. This was an important sign that Jesus was the Messiah. The days of David's reign were for the people of Israel the good old days.

But, in today's story David is a broken man. David's lament for Saul, "O how the mighty have fallen," now seems to apply to him as he mourns the untimely death of his son, Absalom.

How did something like this happen to King David, a man after God's own heart? How was the hero of the Jewish people reduced to this?

The story begins with a rash act of passion. David took another man's wife, Bathsheba and that affair led to murder.

David hid it well. He told his commander to withdraw and leave Bathsheba's husband, Uriah exposed in battle. The commander obeyed, but he felt bad about it. David told him, "Don't worry. These things happen in battle. You have to forget it."

Now, David, being a King could have gotten away with murder except for one thing. God saw what had happened and God was not pleased.

So God had the prophet Nathan confront David. He told the King that God would judge his sinful ways, that from this time forward his kingdom would be troubled by conflict and warfare.

Of course it didn't really take a prophet to make that prediction. We all know that children learn what they live.

And the sons of David were no different. They were "chips off the old block" when it came to rash passionate moves and a thirst for political power.

## TAMAR

The sad story begins with the desire of David's oldest son, Amnon for the beautiful Tamar. He thinks that he is in love with this sister of his half brother, Absalom.

No doubt, Amnon knew that this was wrong. But, hormones rather than reason ruled his life. So, he lured Tamar into a compromising situation.

Amnon feigned illness and then asked his father, David to send his sister to care for him.

When they are alone, he makes his indecent proposal. She refuses, and he forces the issue. Tamar is devastated.

But, Amnon, having satisfied his desire finds that he is no longer "in love" with his half sister. In fact, Scripture tells us that Amnon was filled with great loathing for her, and that his loathing was even greater than his lust.

So, Amnon sent Tamar away in disgrace. He was after all David's first-born son, heir apparent to the throne. He could do what he wanted to do, and he did. And Tamar would bear the shame of this for the rest of her life.

King David finds out what Amnon has done and is said to be "very angry" with him. But, David doesn't do anything nor does he say anything. The Scripture tells us that David would not punish Amnon because he loved him, and he was his firstborn.

When you think about it, what right did David have to criticize his son? After all David had a man killed so that he could steal his wife? So, the King kept quiet.

## HIDDEN SIN MULTIPLIES

Sin always has a history. In this case David's lack of moral authority led to indulging his son. But, this sin would not stay hidden. Instead the effects of this sin would multiply and have severe consequences in the days ahead.

Lest you think that this is just an ancient story with no application, I would remind you of the Penn State scandal, and the various examples of clergy misconduct. When you try to hide a sin the opposite happens. It multiplies.

So it was with this sin. Tamar's brother, Absalom is enraged by Amnon's actions. But, Absalom knows that he must wait to take his revenge. Killing the heir to the throne is not an action to be taken lightly.

Absalom tells Tamar not to carry the hate. Absalom would do that for her. And he does it very well. For two full years Absalom does not say anything, either good or bad, to his half brother, Amnon. It looks like all the consequences have been avoided.

But, in truth, Absalom is just waiting to take his revenge.

After several years have passed Absalom makes his play. He asks David if Amnon and the rest of the royal family can accompany him as he goes out to oversee the sheep shearing. David is rightly suspicious, but he finally agrees.

On the road Absalom throws a feast. At this elaborate barbecue everyone finishes a six-pack (or two). Absalom commands his henchmen to strike and kill Amnon. They did it, and his sister is avenged.

The rest of the royal party was beside themselves in fear. What if Absalom wanted to kill all of the king's sons in an attempt to take the throne? And so all the king's sons stumbled to their feet and rode off in all directions on their mules.

Now mules are hard to ride under the best of circumstances, but they're especially hard to ride when you're under the influence. So no one made it back before David got the false report that Absalom had killed all of David's sons.

David is beside himself. He knew the family was in trouble, but he had no idea things were this bad. He is worried that an early false report that all his sons have been killed is true.

But, then his advisor, Jonadab tells David that Absalom has no cause to kill all of the king's sons. He just wanted revenge against Amnon for what he

did to his sister. (Notice that the sin David thought was hidden was not so well hidden.)

Jonadab's evaluation turns out to be right. Absalom flees to another city. David mourns his son. The language in the Bible is ambiguous. Which son does he mourn, the murdered Amnon or Absalom who must be banished?

I suspect the answer is both. And for three years David mourns and Absalom is in exile.

## THE RETURN FROM EXILE

After three years, David does let Absalom come out of exile, but David isn't speaking to him. For two more years Absalom lives in Jerusalem without contact with his father. Finally, David speaks with his banished son.

But, by this time the years of bitterness have taken their toll. Absalom now has plans to make himself king in place of his father. The young man looks the part and dresses the part. He is handsome and has beautiful long hair. He has a horse and chariot and an entourage like a king.

Absalom even takes up the duties of the king. He noted that David was not so attentive to the day-to-day tasks that a king should do so Absalom started doing the job, making judgments that only the king should make. And the Scripture tells us that this handsome young man with the long flowing hair "stole the hearts of the people of Israel."

Four years after Absalom comes home the young man leads a contingent of folks to Hebron to ostensibly worship God. But, it was not a worship service that Absalom led. It was a coronation. Absalom had himself anointed king at Hebron.

David had to flee. Absalom takes over Jerusalem including most shamefully the royal harem.

But, David proves to be the more cunning leader. He plants spies in the royal court that give Absalom bad advice, and David is able to outflank his less experienced son. Absalom and his troops are hopelessly bogged down in the forest.

## ABSALOM KILLED

And that gets us to our lesson for today. David wants to go with his troops into battle, but the generals don't want him to go. David is too valuable to be killed by a stray arrow. So, David reluctantly agrees to stay behind. But, before the army leaves for battle, David tells his generals before all the people, "Deal gently for my sake with the young man Absalom."

Unfortunately for Absalom David's commander, Joab has no intention of dealing gently with Absalom. In the confusion of battle Absalom rides under a low hanging oak tree. The tree catches his long flowing hair, and he is left dangling as his mule continues on down the path. The Bible uses an apt phrase to describe Absalom's predicament. He is "hanging between heaven and earth."

The lectionary lesson leaves out some of the details of this encounter. The first soldier who happens upon the helpless Absalom does not kill him. Instead, he reports to the general, Joab. He is afraid to harm Absalom because of David's command.

But, Joab does not hesitate. The battle hardened commander spears the helpless would be king and then has other men participate in the killing. Thus, Joab can say to David what David said to Joab long ago when he was troubled about the death of Bathsheba's husband, Uriah, "Don't let this matter trouble you, for the sword devours now one and now another. Things like this happen all the time in battle."

When David learns that Absalom has been killed he becomes a basket case. He cries, "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I have died instead of you. O Absalom, my son, my son!"

Do you hear the regret in that statement? Earlier David did not refer to Absalom as his son but only as the young man.

Now that it is too late David repeats it over and over.

Now David is willing to call Absalom his son, but his grace and repentance come too late. When a loved one dies the regrets of the past and the loss of the present come together in a pain that is too deep for words.

## SIN SPREADS LIKE A CANCER

Notice how sin spreads like a cancer. Not only is David's son killed this day but the Bible tells us that 20,000 were killed in battle that same day. David's grief is repeated many times in the lives of his subjects.

And all these deaths can be traced to the king's lack of a moral compass. Don't tell me that we shouldn't evaluate our leaders from a moral standpoint. Personal sins can and have led to tragic public consequences, back then and now.

David continues his mourning, but the experienced general, Joab knows that this is not good. He is angry with David for canceling the victory celebration. David the King has a responsibility to his people. The general tells him to get out there and put on a brave front.

And David does it. He manages to scrape the country together after the civil war, but things were never the same after this. The pain of this war continued to haunt God's people for many years to come and weaken them internationally.

There's a reason for telling this story. It shows us how sin and especially hidden sin can destroy us. The people in the Bible are not all good or all bad. They are like us. They are complex.

Even though the context is different, the mixed motives and failings of David's family should seem somehow familiar to us.

We too know what it is like to pass on our bad habits to our children. Many of us know what it is like to make bad decisions in haste and repent in leisure.

We too have known the loneliness of long nights and broken hearts. We too have been told by the cold, calculating Joabs of the world that "life goes on" and that we have to get a grip on ourselves.

Life does go on, but it is never the same.

Like David we continue, but part of us is dead and gone forever.

## TOTAL DEPRAVITY

I think the Apostle Paul captured the essence of this story in prose. He wrote in his letter to the Romans, “Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?” (Romans 7:24) Theologians call this total depravity.

In other words, the history of sin teaches us that we need more than just a little tweaking around the edges. We are sinners who are part of a sinful system. We need salvation.

We need to repent of our sins. And this means more than just saying we’re sorry. This means changing our ways. And only God can help us do that.

(By the way, David said he was “sorry” after taking another man’s wife. Psalm 51 written by David after he was caught in the sin of adultery and committing murder to cover it up expresses the idea of repentance beautifully. We often use it as a confession of sin. But, David just talked the talk. He didn’t walk the walk.)

Now you might say, “That’s too negative.” In our postmodern world many even want to deny that sin exists. But, I think it’s cruel to ignore sin because it does not allow for the possibility of repentance.

Take David’s story, for example. If David had punished Amnon for his sexual misconduct, perhaps Absalom would not have taken his revenge. Maybe there would have been no breach between David and Absalom. Maybe thousands of lives would have been saved.

Sin was compounded in David’s house because sin was ignored. And the same will be true in our house as well. God loves us too much to ignore our sin. God’s righteous judgment of our sin is a means of grace.

Everyone here is broken by sin in some way. There’s no need to hide that fact. There’s no need to pretend that the wound does not exist. I may not know where you have been broken by life, but I do know that in some significant way you are broken. You have been wounded by your own sin and by the sin of others.

So, what do we do with a wound? We expose it to the light and treat it. If a wound remains untreated it only gets worse. And if sin that is not exposed to the light of God's judgment will only get worse too.

It doesn't have to be that way. Each week we have a confession of sin in our service. Why?

Each week we have sin to confess. And if you think that part of the worship service doesn't apply to you, you are sadly mistaken.

The Bible tells us that if we confess our sin, God is faithful and just and will forgive us of all unrighteousness. There is hope, but it is a hope contingent upon confession and God's forgiveness.

The tragic story of David teaches us the danger of trying to hide or minimize the sin in our lives. But, the story of Jesus teaches us that even the worst sin, even the sin of betrayal can be forgiven.

The Apostle Paul summarizes the story of sin in one sentence. In his letter to the Romans Paul asked in despair, "Who will rescue me from this body of death?"

And then the answer came, "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord."

In the Spirit of Christ we are forgiven and freed to live a new life, a life free of guilt and sin.

We hear it every week, and we need to hear it every week. In Jesus Christ we are forgiven.

Amen.