

First Presbyterian Church
2 Sam. 15:5-13, "Seeking God in the Storms of Life"
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 8/4/2024

It's been quite a summer journey through the life of David.
We've hit some of the really well-known moments in David's life,
including his battle with Goliath,
and God's choice of David to replace Saul as king.
Last week we learned that King David was no Messiah,
as he devised an adulterous affair with Bathsheba
and executed a murder plot against her husband Uriah.

But today we cover a portion of David's story
that is not that well known at all,
though it plays an important role in shaping his legacy.

It's a dark story filled with tragedy, revenge,
dysfunctional family relationships, suffering, and rebellion.
These years force David to face
the most difficult challenges of his life.

There are seasons of life that are full of storms.
When we make terrible mistakes or have to adapt to
the damaging actions of others.
God is not absent in these times,
but seeking God in the storms of life feels different:
it can feel more elevated, more "real,"
but it can also feel clouded, obscure,
when there seems to be no right decision.

In this time of trial, David must decide whether
he will practice leadership as God's chosen king,
or remain on autopilot, letting the chips fall where they may.

This story begins in chapter 13 with David's beautiful daughter, Tamar.
Many years before the passage we read today,
Tamar was desired by and raped by her
calculating half-brother Amnon.

When this horrific deed took place Tamar's full-brother, Absalom,
gave his sister some advice: "Be quiet for now, my sister;
he is your brother. Don't take this thing to heart."

"Don't take this thing to heart." ... Can you imagine?
But inside Absalom was quiet rage. Two years later, Absalom
orchestrated Amnon's murder to avenge Tamar's honor.

Subsequently, Absalom leaves the palace.
For murder, even when justified as revenge, is still murder,
and he fears the wrath of his father, David.
And so, Absalom lived as a fugitive for three years in the wilderness.
(Crazy, right? Does it make you feel any better
about your own family issues?)

When Absalom finally tries to come home,
he is granted clemency by David – but from a distance.
This distance is demonstrated in the story by only referring
to David as, "the king," never using his proper name.

Joab, David's advisor, knows that David's heart
was heavy without Absalom.

He arranged for word to be sent out to Absalom to consider returning,
and then for David to be approached
with the idea from another person.

The king sniffs out this reconciliation plot,
but grants permission for him to come back anyway, saying,
"Very well, I will do it. Go, bring back the young man Absalom."

Then we read in 14:23,
"Joab went and brought Absalom back to Jerusalem.
But the king said, "He must go to his own house;
he must not see my face."

So Absalom went to his own house
and did not see the face of the king."

What was that all about? "He must not see my face?"

Well, you might remember that when David sinned and murdered Uriah,
he *received* forgiveness for his own sins at a very direct level –
face to face with Nathan,
and face to face with his new wife Bathsheba.

But now, with Absalom, he will *grant* forgiveness only at arm's length.

I think I know this feeling. When I receive grace by faith as God's free gift,
I can also extend that same grace to others without any reluctance.
It's easy and free.

But if I receive grace and feel ashamed,
then I will be stingy in offering grace to others. It feels forced.

Our relationships matter.

Don't take them for granted, don't hold your pride so tightly
that you lose all sense of who you really are.

David is clearly forcing it here.

He says Absalom can return, but there will be no grand reunion
of father and son.

It took two years in all for Absalom to be granted a presence before David.

The story reads very much like Jesus' parable of the prodigal son,
only in the David story, the father does not run down the road
to welcome the prodigal back.

He says, go to your own house,
and do not look at my face.

In time, Absalom's brooding, vengeful heart obtained a new target:

If the king would not welcome him back in the family,
then perhaps he need not be on the throne at all.

David, who received lavish grace, cannot extend grace to his own son.

His crimes of passion and lust had terrible consequences,
but neither of them caused David's downfall.

What doomed David's kingship was the long term,
calculated rejection of a family member in need of grace.

Every family has a story like this somewhere down the line.

If we cannot receive grace and offer grace ... graciously ...

we run the risk of permanent splits in our families and friends.

This stuff really matters.

That ends part 1 of this drama.

Part 2 is Absalom's plot to take David's throne,
which we read about in chapter 15.

But to get a better picture of Absalom, you need to hear this description
from 4:25-26 we read a description of Absalom:

“In all Israel there was not a man so highly praised for his handsome appearance as Absalom. From the top of his head to the sole of his foot there was no blemish in him. Whenever he cut the hair of his head—he used to cut his hair once a year because it became too heavy for him—he would weigh it, and its weight was two hundred shekels by the royal standard.”

His beauty and his anger at his father made him a magnet
for all those with complaints against the king.

He worked the crowds for four long years,
winning their favor, planting seeds of doubt
regarding David's ability to lead.

Finally the day came, and Absalom staged a coup
in cooperation with one of David's most trusted cabinet members.

That is when David learns that the hearts of the people
are with Absalom.

(Had he not been paying attention? Was he that oblivious?)

King David, the charmed shepherd boy who slayed Goliath
and became God's chosen leader

has been personally rejected by the nation,
and now he is forced to flee.

As he suffers through this mess, he knows that at least in part,
it was his own fault.

Later in Chapter 15, it says that David continued up the Mount of Olives, weeping as he went; his head was covered and he was barefoot.
All the people with him covered their heads too
and were weeping as they went up.

That leads us to part 3 of this biblical drama.

David, fleeing from Jerusalem is cursed
by a relative of Saul's family named Shimei
while riding on the road with his military escort.
He cursed him, and threw rocks at him and his escorts.

In. 16:8, Shimei yells, **“Get out, get out, you murderer, you scoundrel!
The Lord has repaid you for all the blood you shed
in the household of Saul, in whose place you have reigned.
The Lord has given the kingdom into the hands of your son Absalom.
You have come to ruin because you are a murderer!”**

Is there any chance this is accepted at any other time in David's life?
David's bodyguards are incensed,
they say this man Shimei should be decapitated at once!
In earlier days, Shimei's mockery might have resulted in
in a violent response from David.

But David is now in a position of suffering, not of power.
And so he takes this cursing not as treachery,
but as a divine rebuke and a call to humility.

In fact, he responds with a theological reflection:
“If he is cursing because the LORD said to him, ‘Curse David,’
who can ask, “Why do you do this?” REPEAT
David considers the possibility that if he humbly accepts the curse
of the Lord through Shimei, then perhaps the Lord will
look upon his misery and restore him to his covenant blessing.

The scene's conclusion is both comical and profound at the same time:
David and his men continued along the road while Shimei
was going along the hillside opposite him,
cursing as he went and throwing stones at him
and showering him with dirt.

Then the king and all the people with him
arrived at their destination exhausted. And there he refreshed himself.

David has been well and truly humbled.
And in the state of humility, he is able to return to his true self,
the one which resonates with God's own heart,
the self who is called a beloved child of God.

It would have been better if David could have avoided all this ugliness
and simply remained faithful to God's calling all along.

But none of us get the "perfect life" for following God.
None of us do it all the right way. .
We get the life we get, and it's a tangle of influences and layers,
joy and grief, stagnation and growth.

You're either in one of these stormy periods of life,
just got out of one, or waiting for the next one.

And yet, God's grace abounds during life's difficult seasons.
Not necessarily preventing or protecting us
from the consequences of sin,
but abiding with us and patiently waiting to grow our character
so that we can call out to the Lord again in faith.