

Focus: Christ gives us forgiveness.

Last week, the prophet Nathan ominously warned King David: “¹⁰Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house, for you have despised me, and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife. ¹¹Thus says the LORD: I will raise up trouble against you from within your own house; and I will take your wives before your eyes, and give them to your neighbor, and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this very sun. ¹²For you did it secretly; but I will do this thing before all Israel, and before the sun.”

This prophecy is fulfilled in the tragic story of David and his son Absalom. Trouble in David’s own house. Sexual exploitation. Violence. Revolution.

It all begins with a terrible scene. One of David’s sons Amnon rapes his sister Tamar. When confronted with this fact, David is angry with his son, but does nothing. We don’t know why he doesn’t act. It could be love for his son Amnon. But it also could be cowardice in confronting him. It even could be that he feels it’s hypocritical for punishing his son for the types of licentiousness David himself has just engaged in.

But whatever the case, it is Amnon’s brother Absalom who is outraged by this and takes the law into his own hands and puts his brother to death by the sword.

As the story develops, we see all the chickens coming home to roost for David. He’s lost control of his kingdom: the king’s main job is to ensure justice and safety for his people. He has lost control of his family: raping and killing each other. Finally, it all culminates when Absalom fulfills Nathan’s prophecy against David. He fomented a popular following and uprising, sleeps with David’s wives and concubines, openly proclaims himself king, and leads a rival army.

This is an action-packed story, the Bible “for adults.” And there will not be a fairytale ending. David whose life had been under God’s blessing now sees things from the other side. He has to get his hands dirty in the world of politics and war. David’s only option to keep his throne is to raise an army. “The men of Israel were defeated there by the servants of David, and the slaughter there was great on that day, twenty thousand men.” Notice what the writer says? “The men of Israel,” were defeated “by the servants of David.” In other words, David’s sword has turned against his own people. David has gone from being a national hero to a villain. His kingship remains intact, but only by the tip of the sword. And the worst part: His son Absalom slain in battle. In some ways, you could say by this point that it could not end any other way. But for David, well, just listen to these some of the most heartbreaking words of the Bible: “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!’”

Can you imagine the scene of this great man openly weeping for a son he cannot have back?

This story is hard to preach on for a couple reasons. One is because there is nothing deeper I can say than what David himself has said. Second, because this has all the marks of King Arthur’s Camelot or maybe even the Kennedys’ Camelot. How can we possibly relate to this type of story?

But I think there are a few sober takeaways: One, for those of us who are parents, or especially fathers, there's a lesson here about what our children learn from watching us. Exploitation of women, violence, is there any question where Amnon and Absalom learned these things? Second, we learn something about the role of justice. David was afraid of doing the hard but right thing, but so often in life we can't outrun the hard decisions. They catch up to us eventually and ten times worse for having festered for so long.

But for me, most of all I come back to the heart-wrenching ending: "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!"

There is no question Absalom did some terrible things. Adultery, murder, usurpation, shaming his father in front of the kingdom. And perhaps we can even hear some guilt in David's voice that it has come to this. But at the end of the day, what is really going to last?

It's this, isn't it—that there will always be one empty seat at the table. There will always be one empty place in David's heart. There will always be incompleteness, an unfinished part of their relationship.

And this is where David's family really isn't so different from our own families. I would be willing to bet that for almost every one of our families present today, there is some estrangement, some anger, some unresolved tension, some sorrow, some *separation* with at least someone close to us.

Ephesians tells us, "Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger,"²⁷ and do not make room for the devil." "Do not let the sun go down on your anger." My mom has always passed that on to me; she in turn received it from her father.

I am not naïve enough to say that it's always so easy. For many of us, there may be legitimate reasons for the separation. And for plenty of others of us, it may be that we would love nothing more than to have the person back and they won't come.

That is why forgiveness is something we pray for. "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." Forgiveness is not natural. It is hard. In this lifetime, it may always be a work in progress.

But it is Christ's work. Forgiveness allows us to see the person instead of the wrong, the future instead of the past. Forgiveness is where we all kneel before the cross beneath the arms of the man who refused to give up on even those who crucified him.

When we hear the story of David and Absalom, we hear a hard story, but one that tells us very clearly what is at stake. When we hear the story of Jesus, we hear a hard story but with a message of hope. The message of Christ and his forgiveness is also the Bible for adults if we can receive it and live by it. **Amen.**