Once upon a time, in a galaxy far, far away, twins are born, Luke and Leia. Their mother dies in childbirth. Their father joins the Dark Side and becomes the evil force known as the dreaded Darth Vader.

Luke and Leia, orphaned at an early age, have been told that their father has been slain by Darth Vader. Luke aspires to become a mighty Jedi fighter like his father.


Darth Vader reveals his secret identity. “Obi Wan never told you what happened to your father.”

“He told me enough,” Luke answers. “He told me you killed him.”

“No,” Darth Vader answers, “I am your father.”


Father and son meet in a final, climatic duel. This time, Luke gains the upper hand and his father is mortally wounded. Luke will not kill his wounded father, believing there is still good locked up in his heart. He removes his father’s mask and they see each other face to face. His father assures Luke there is still good in him before he dies.

Filmgoers ranked this feud between Luke Skywalker and Darth Vader as the most memorable father son rivalry in cinema history. Today’s story rates as another classic father son rivalry—between David and his son Absalom.

First some background: King David marries Maacab, the daughter of a neighboring king. It’s purely a marriage of political convenience. David and Maacab have two children: Absalom and Tamar. Absalom is too handsome for his own good and spoiled rotten.

Absalom’s half-brother Ammon rapes Tamar. David is furious but does nothing to punish him. Perhaps David has been compromised by his own sins with Bathsheba.

Since David won’t confront Ammon, Absalom murders his half-brother and flees to the wilderness. Father and son don’t see one another for three years. Finally, David calls on Joab to patch things up between father and son. Joab convinces Absalom to come to Jerusalem; yet, father and son don’t see each other for three years.
My son, my son, Absalom! If only I had died instead of you.... - 2 Samuel 18:33

Given that Jerusalem isn’t all that large, they must have gone out of their way to avoid each other. Perhaps each is waiting for the other to make the first move. Absalom finally asks Joab to intervene. When all else fails, call on Joab. When he refuses, Absalom sets fire to Joab’s hayfield which secures Absalom a hearing with the king.

Their reunion is fleeting. Rembrandt poignantly captures Absalom kneeling before his father and their embrace. But the good vibes don’t last long. Maybe it’s too little, too late. Absalom has already been recruiting people to his side to lead a revolt against his father. David is forced to seek refuge in the desert.

The stage is now set for a civil war between father and son. David is torn between his duty as a king and his role as a father. When David sends his soldiers into battle, he tells Joab, “Be gentle with the young man Absalom for my sake” (2 Samuel 18:5).

The battle rages and David’s forces prevail. As Absalom escapes on horseback, his hair becomes entangled in the branches of an oak tree. Absalom is now suspended between life and death, heaven and earth.

David’s troops recall his plea to go easy on Absalom, so they refrain from doing what their hands have been trained to do. Not so with Joab; he’s a military man through and through. He treats Absalom as the enemy and runs a spear through his heart.

Messengers must tell David the fateful news. The first messenger heralds the battle’s successful outcome. David doesn’t give a rip about the outcome; his only concern is the welfare of his son. This first messenger can’t bring himself to tell David the awful truth. But the second messenger, a foreigner ignorant of family complexities, tells David plainly that Absalom is dead.

David retreats to his chambers and falls to his knees. “O my son, Absalom! My son, my son, Absalom! If only I had died instead of you—O Absalom, my son, my son” (2 Samuel 18:33). It ranks as one of the most anguished cries of grief in ancient literature.

Edmund Burke served as Prime Minister of England in the early 1800s. He was enthusiastic in his support of the long war against France led by Napoleon. He didn’t think twice about the sorrows the war brought to people until his only son was killed in battle. In his grief, his place in history and the cause of war suddenly lost its meaning. He wrote of that time, “The storms have gone over me. I lie like one of those old oaks which the late hurricane scattered about me. I am stripped of all my honors. I am torn up by the roots and lie prostrate on the earth. I am undone. I live in inverted order. They who ought to have
succeeded me have gone before me. They who should have been to me as posterity are in the place of ancestors.”

We’ve been asking two questions of David’s story in recent weeks. What do we learn about David? What do we learn about God?

Let’s start with David. David’s humanity is laid bare for all to see. Some of you identify with his gut-wrenching pathos. You have lost a loved one and have felt comparable anguish.

David, this man after God’s heart, isn’t immune from suffering. In my experience, Christian people suffer in the same proportion as atheists do. We are not granted immunity simply because we are believers.

I spend considerable time with people wrestling with the why-do-these-things-happen-to-me question? Like any pastor, I struggle to find something appropriate to say. This much I know: the God we worship is not immune from suffering. Christianity is the only religion that tells you that God lost a son in an act of violent injustice. John Stott writes, “I would myself never believe in God if it were not for the cross. In the real world of pain, how could one worship a God who was immune from it?”

David is one complex dude. Aren’t we all? David has his virtues; he has his flaws. Don’t we all? How can a man with a heart after God be this complex? In the same way, we are complex. We are all flawed, each in our own way.

Scripture states plainly that sins as well as virtues are passed down generationally. The Bible attests to the fact that “the sins of the fathers are visited on the children.” Look at the progression of sin in our story. David commits adultery with Bathsheba and arranges for her husband’s murder to cover his paternity. David’s son Ammon rapes his half-sister but David, neutralized by his own sins, does nothing about it. Absalom murders his half-brother, but again, David doesn’t intervene. Eventually father and son wage civil war against each other. Sin has a multiplying effect in David’s life. Sin, if it is not resisted, is passed down generationally in families.

Now, for the second question, what do we learn about God? The story I replayed spans seven chapters in 2nd Samuel. God doesn’t appear anywhere in this whole sordid mess. God seems removed and out of sight. Yet, things aren’t always what they seem. In God’s big story of creation, fall and redemption, God brings redemption out of chaos. God wins redemption through Jesus, the promised Son of David.

The parallels between David’s story and Jesus’ story are fascinating. David is undone by treason in much the same way Jesus is victimized
by betrayal. Absalom dies in a tree as Jesus dies on a tree (cross and tree are used interchangeably in Scripture). David laments if he could have died for his son, he would have done so. The New Testament picks up on the distinction between David and Jesus. In Charles Spurgeon’s words, “David would have died for Absalom but Jesus did die for us.”

Frederick Buechner writes about David in his book, *Peculiar Treasures*: “If he could have done the boy’s dying for him, he would have done it. If he could have paid the price for the boy’s betrayal of him, he could have paid it. If he could have given his own life to make the boy alive again, he would have given it. But even a king can’t do things like that. As later history was to prove, it takes the King himself.”

This is now our 11th consecutive sermon on King David. Next Sunday is the last in this 12-part series. It has become clear that David is no model citizen. His adultery and murder, as we explored last Sunday, was the low water mark. He doesn’t fare much better in today’s lesson. He is not heralded in Scripture for his parenting skills.

But here’s the big takeaway. God doesn’t give up on people. If ever you’ve wondered whether God really forgives me, surely David’s life is proof.