

# “DAVID & ABSALOM”

a sermon by

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*Text: “And 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!’” (2 Samuel 18:34)*

People have a sincere dislike and disrespect for most things political. And so people can be skeptical of any process labeled ‘political’ because it is perceived to be riddled with dissention, divisiveness and distrust. We see this in the news and in our elected officials. We believe this to be a new day for politics and for political processes.

The only problem with our perception is that it’s wrong.

From the very beginning of our nation’s history, politics and political processes have been contentious. Throughout the two terms served by President George Washington, there was a deep and bitter division within the President’s Cabinet. There were some, like Alexander Hamilton, who favored a strong national government and its accoutrement – national banks and the national government’s assumption of the national and of certain states’ debts. There were others, like Thomas Jefferson, who feared that a broadly-powered national government threatened the rights of the states and of the individuals.

President Washington was not pleased with the contentious division within his Cabinet. “In his Farewell Address, released to the press in September [1792], the first President warned against party strife; he also cautioned the American people against ‘excessive partiality for one foreign nation and excessive dislike of another.’ But no one paid any attention (then or now).”

They may be unpleasant, but certain political processes are important. When working properly, they bring together people with very different and occasionally divisive opinions, and force them to work together. This kind of process is something like a pressure cooker. The more unpleasant the experience of being pressure cooked for the toughened ingredients, the more palatable the results for everyone else.

Yes, to many, each and every political process is quite distasteful. But, we must remember that the absence of functional procedures – even those that we may not like – will certainly lead to a terrible crisis of function and, perhaps also of faith. Such was the situation that involved David and Absalom.

## *Absalom & His Siblings*

The story of David and Absalom is found in the Old Testament book Second Samuel. This book of Samuel presents something like an ‘unauthorized’ biography of King David. Often unflattering of the king, this book is analogous to modern-day media outlets. What Fox News is to Bill Clinton; what NPR is to George Bush; Second Samuel is this same foil to King David. Elsewhere in the Bible, King David is treated more sympathetically; particularly in the books of Chronicles; but not in this book of Samuel.

As portrayed in Second Samuel, David is human – bearing so many flaws. And his family is damaged from within and likewise damaging to many throughout the kingdom. Such is the editorial tenor throughout Samuel’s narrative with regard to this king. Such is the setting of the story of David and of Absalom.

Absalom was the third-born son of the king and was third in the line of succession to the throne. But, as history would reveal, Absalom shared in the ambitions of his father, King David.

I speak of this family as being damaged from within and likewise damaging to many throughout the kingdom. One terrible, nightmarish example of this family’s infighting involved Amnon, the first-born son, and Absalom’s beautiful sister, Tamar. Amnon said that he was in love with this woman, his half-sister. His actions would reveal his true character.

By feigning illness, Amnon is able to be alone with this unsuspecting girl. The Biblical text is clear in its description of Amnon’s actions. He deceives this girl, bringing her into his tent while pretending to be sick. In their conversation, Tamar made the very good point that there was no reason for him to force himself on her. It was perfectly permissible for this future king to ask and to receive her as his wife. Amnon would not listen to her. He was not dissuaded from his desires. He did what he had set out to do.

When it was morning, Amnon had something of a change of heart. Samuel tells what happens, “Then Amnon hated her with very great hatred; so that the hatred with which he hated her was greater than the love with which he had loved her” (2 Samuel 13:15). Amnon ordered her to leave at once. Tamar hesitated long enough to object, reminding him of what had happened the night before. Again Amnon would not listen to her. He called immediately for a servant to seize his sister, to throw her into the street and to lock the door behind her. Such was the urgency of Amnon’s regret.

Samuel describes the aftermath of this event as it impacted the family. “...Tamar dwelt, a desolate woman, in her brother Absalom’s house. When King David heard of all these things, he was very angry. But Absalom spoke to Amnon neither good nor bad; for Absalom hated Amnon, because he had forced his sister Tamar” (2 Samuel 13:21-22).

Notice the events that followed this tragic episode. Tamar was a desolate woman. King David was very angry. Absalom hated Amnon.

Notice also what is missing from the events that followed this tragic episode. King David is angry, but he doesn’t do anything about it. As king, he had all of the power and authority to decree that Tamar was to be given as the wife of Amnon. This would have preserved her place in the community and in the family. Even though he is angered by these events, David does nothing. He does not act in his capacity as king. Neither does he act as the father of a son who has done wrong. Nor, for that matter, does he act as the father of a daughter who has been wronged.

Absalom hated Amnon. Two years later, Absalom would conspire successfully to murder Amnon, his brother (2 Samuel 13:23-29). After this Absalom would run into hiding and remain exiled for the next three years (2 Samuel 13:34, 37ff). Again the reaction of King David is described by the emotion that he feels. “And the spirit of the king longed to go forth to Absalom; for he was comforted about Amnon, seeing he was dead” (2 Samuel 13:39). Once again the response of this king and father is void of any appropriate, pro-active action.

## *David & Absalom*

The bitterness within this family, the anger of Absalom, and David's unwillingness to take action are all important to the story of Absalom and David.

Absalom waited two years for his murderous revenge against Amnon. He then spent three years in hiding. Following that time Absalom was allowed in Jerusalem, though he remained exiled from his family. Eventually, Absalom was allowed to approach and to be received by his father, the king. But Absalom did not return as a penitent, remorseful, wayward son. Absalom did not seek out his rightful place in the family. He had other plans for the future.

At this point, there is an important detail about Absalom that must be mentioned. This is an attractive – exceedingly handsome – young man. He is handsome, strong and decisive. His hair has legendary length and strength. Now restored to his place in the family, Absalom also has access to his family's wealth. He begins traveling through Jerusalem with a chariot, horses and fifty men to run before him (2 Samuel 15:1).

In that day, Jerusalem was a small town. It is difficult to imagine the spectacle that must have surrounded Absalom. He was a young, handsome man. He was in the line of royal succession. He used his father's wealth to create every appearance of success and prestige. Absalom would use all of this to undermine his father's authority and reign as king.

Each day Absalom would be up early and travel to the city gates. Day after day, for the next four years, Absalom would go about the work of undermining his father's authority. Samuel describes Absalom's work, and its results.

“Absalom would say, ‘See, your claims are good and right; but there is no one deputed by the king to hear you.’ Absalom said moreover, ‘If only I were judge in the land! Then all who had a suit or cause might come to me, and I would give them justice.’ Whenever people came near to do obeisance to him, he would put out his hand and take hold of them, and kiss them. Thus Absalom did to every Israelite who came to the king for judgment; so Absalom stole the hearts of the people of Israel” (2 Samuel 15:3-6).

Absalom stole the hearts of the people of Israel.

When Absalom believed the time was right, Absalom set into motion his plans to overthrow King David and to have himself become the King of Israel (2 Samuel 15:7ff.). For some time it appeared that this coup d'état would succeed. The king was forced out of Jerusalem and into hiding. Absalom seized the palatial home and all of its contents. Very publicly and crudely, Absalom attempted to demonstrate that he was in control of all that had belonged to his father.

The only thing that Absalom could not control was his anger.

In a bold and decisive move, King David sent his most trusted advisor into Jerusalem. At the king's instruction, this man pretended to support Absalom's revolt. As a double-agent, he was able to convince Absalom that his coup d'état was incomplete as long as David remained alive (2 Samuel 16:16ff; esp. 17:15).

Absalom was convinced. He gathered his army and rode out into the forest in an attempt to kill his own father. In the midst of the battle, Absalom's mule is startled in the battle and bolts through a thicket of oak trees. Absalom's hair – his thick, long, beautiful hair; his hair of legendary length and strength – becomes entangled in the branches. This leaves him alone and defenseless, hanging in the tree by the strength of his hair. Even though the king had directed them to deal kindly with Absalom, the king's commanders gather around this revolting revolutionary. They kill him.

There's an old saying, “Success has many fathers. Failure rarely has more than one.” Nowhere in history is this more true than with a failed revolution. When successful, a coup d'état is called a revolution. Revolutions have many heroes, fathers of the new nations. But, when a coup d'état fails, people move as quickly as possible away from the insurgent leader.

The uprising was over. The coup d'état had failed. There remained only one tiny little bit of a detail. Who would tell the king that they had killed his son?

### *David & His Grief*

There is never a good way to deliver bad news.

Some years ago I was working with the Chaplain's office at the Veteran's Affairs Medical Center in Richmond, Virginia. In certain programs the medical interns were required to learn how to tell a family that a loved-one had passed away. The intern would deliver the terrible, occasionally tragic news to the family. Later in the night, the on-duty Chaplain and the attending physician would review the conversation with the intern and issue a grade. That whole process, and in particular those grading sessions, were among the strangest conversations in all of my life in ministry.

There is no good way to deliver bad news. But, when delivering bad news to a sovereign monarch who has the authority to kill you on a whim, there are many more opportunities for this conversation to go poorly.

Demonstrating their strength of character and their confidence in the king, David's commanders do not – do NOT – go themselves. They instead send a Cushite, a foreigner, to tell the king that the insurgent leader is dead. And, as the story is told, it appears as though they failed to mention to the messenger that this now-dead insurgent leader was also the king's own son. So, the conversation unfolds like this:

“Good tidings for my lord the king! For the LORD has delivered you this day from the power of all who rose up against you.”

“Is it well with the young man Absalom?”

“May the enemies of my lord the king, and all who rise up against you for evil, be like that young man.”

The reaction that followed was not at all what the messenger had expected. “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!’”

Amnon forgot that Tamar was his sister. Absalom forgot that Amnon was his brother and that David was his father.

There it is. There is the thing that we hate most about politics and about politicians. We hate being forgotten and overlooked. We hate it when others act as if we don't matter; as if our work were of no consequence.

Amnon forgot that Tamar was his sister. Absalom forgot that Amnon was his brother and that David was his father. But David, he never forgot. Though deeply angered, saddened and wounded by the actions of his children, David never forgot who they were.

As we express the voracity of our dislike for politics and for all things political, we like to think of ourselves as if we were King David – though flawed, never forgetting our relationship with others, never forgetting our relationship with them, and even as prevailing over terrible adversity.

The only possible problem with this idea is the simple fact that it is wrong.

When we embrace the language of anger and of hatred, when we look down upon others, we are no different than Absalom. In our own hearts, and perhaps to others, we make that same idle promise, ‘Oh, this claim is good and just. Why, if I were judge, there would be justice in the land.’

Earnest Hemingway was quoted as saying, “If you have a success, you have it for the wrong reasons. If you become popular it is always because of the worst aspects of your work.”

Whenever any one of us looks down upon another, even upon deserving politicians, our reaction is exactly wrong.

What, you may ask, would I have you do? What is a good and right reaction?

The Apostle Paul wrote to the Ephesians, saying, "...let every one speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another. Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you" (Ephesians 4:25-27, 31-32).

This is a difficult, arguably impossible standard for us to meet. Some would tell you that the difficulty of this standard is reason enough that we ought not to try.

Not so. The enormous difficulty of this standard, the fact that this instruction is so very difficult is the very reason that we ought to work all the more.

Amen.

END NOTES