

“Somewhere Between Heaven and Earth”
II Samuel 18:5-33; Ephesians 4:25-5:2; John 6:35, 47-51

John 6:35, 47-51

³⁵Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty...

⁴⁷Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. ⁴⁸I am the bread of life. ⁴⁹Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. ⁵⁰This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. ⁵¹I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”

Ephesians 4:25-27, 4:29-5:2

²⁵So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. ²⁶Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, ²⁷and do not make room for the devil.

²⁹Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. ³⁰And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. ³¹Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, ³²and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

^{5:1}Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, ²and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Introduction

David was the beloved king of Israel. He had abused his power, and then dramatically repented and gone on to receive God’s blessing.

Later in the story, David’s oldest son, Amnon, violated Amnon’s own half-sister, Tamar; and then Tamar’s full brother, Absalom, vowed that he would take revenge against Amnon. That triggered a full-scale war of rebellion, and at one point, Absalom had taken over Israel from his own father, David.

The reading picks up with David acting as commander of his forces, preparing to go into battle against his son, Absalom, who has taken control of Israel.

II Samuel 18:5-33 (selected)

On the eve of battle, King David ordered his commanders, including Joab:

⁵...“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.

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

⁹Absalom 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.

¹⁰A man saw it, and told Joab [David’s old friend and military commander], “I saw Absalom hanging in an oak.”

¹¹Joab said to the man who told him, “What, you saw him! Why then did you not strike him there to the ground? I would have been glad to give you ten pieces of silver and a belt.”

¹²But the man said to Joab, “Even if I felt in my hand the weight of a thousand pieces of silver, I would not raise my hand against the king’s son; for in our hearing the king commanded you and Abishai and Ittai, saying: For my sake protect the young man Absalom!

¹³On the other hand, if I had dealt treacherously against his life (and there is nothing hidden from the king), then you yourself would have stood aloof.”

¹⁴Joab said, “I will not waste time like this with you.”

He [struck] Absalom, while he was still alive in the oak.

¹⁵And ten young men, Joab's armor-bearers, surrounded Absalom and struck him, and killed him. ¹⁶Then Joab sounded the trumpet, and the troops came back from pursuing Israel, for Joab restrained the troops.

¹⁷They took Absalom, threw him into a great pit in the forest, and raised over him a very great heap of stones. Meanwhile all the Israelites fled to their homes.

¹⁹Then Ahimaaz son of Zadok said, "Let me run, and carry tidings to the king that the Lord has delivered him from the power of his enemies."

²⁰Joab said to him, "You are not to carry tidings today; you may carry tidings another day, but today you shall not do so, because the king's son is dead."

²¹Then Joab said to a Cushite, "[You, go] tell the king what you have seen."

The Cushite bowed before Joab, and ran.

²²Then Ahimaaz son of Zadok said again to Joab, "Come what may, let me also run after the Cushite."

And Joab said, "Why will you run, my son, seeing that you have no reward for the tidings?"

²³"Come what may," he said, "I will run." So Joab said to him, "Run."

Then Ahimaaz ran by the way of the Plain, and outran the Cushite.

²⁴Now David was sitting between the two gates. The sentinel went up to the roof of the gate by the wall, and when he looked up, he saw a man running alone. ²⁵The sentinel shouted and told the king. The king said, "If he is alone, there are tidings in his mouth."

He kept coming, and drew near.

²⁶Then the sentinel saw another man running; and the sentinel called to the gatekeeper and said, "See, another man running alone!"

The king said, "He also is bringing tidings."

²⁷The sentinel said, “I think the running of the first one is like the running of Ahimaaz son of Zadok.” The king said, “He is a good man, and comes with good tidings.”

²⁸Then Ahimaaz cried out to the king, “All is well!” He prostrated himself before the king with his face to the ground, and said, “Blessed be the Lord your God, who has delivered up the men who raised their hand against my lord the king.”

²⁹The king said, “Is it well with the young man Absalom?”

Ahimaaz answered, “When Joab sent your servant, I saw a great tumult, but I do not know what it was.”

³⁰The king said, “Turn aside, and stand here.” So he turned aside, and stood still.

³¹Then 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.” ³²The 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.”

³³The 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!”

The Sermon

The envelope had a familiar return address, and I opened it up to find an aching, six-page, hand-written letter: an epistle from an old church guy whose time was growing short, to a very young student minister not yet graduated from seminary. He was the most senior active member of the small church where I was sent to do my field education work in the early 1990s, and he had stepped forward to be not only the chair of the committee that reviewed the work of the field ed student, but a mentor and a friend as well.

He had a withered hand which he could still write with. He and Marge had taken me out to lunch after church one day, and as we lingered at the table afterward, he told me the story from World War II, when he was somewhere in Italy, and they

were engaged in an all-out firefight. Early on in the battle, he felt the sharp, noiseless sting that would leave his hand maimed for the rest of his life.

A buddy of his saw that he'd been hit and grabbed him, bodily, and threw him underneath a truck for cover; and he lay there, unable to participate, unable to come to the aid of his own buddies. After the firefight, he was tended by a field medic, and was eventually sent home. I never asked to see his Purple Heart but I wish I would have thought to do that—to honor him and whoever that other guy was who had dragged him out of harm's way all those decades ago.

We shared some silence, and finally, I said, “Marge, I’ll bet you’ve heard that story so many times, you could tell it yourself.” And she said—and if you knew any World War II combat veterans, you already know this punchline—she said, “This is the first time I’ve ever heard it.”

For fifty years, the story of that combat, which impacted every mundane, unthinking task that most of us do with our hands—for their entire life together from age 26 to 76—she had never heard that story. And it wasn't that she was forgetful: he confirmed he had never told it to her before.

We remained close all through the year, and finally, as I was rounding out my apprenticeship in that small congregation, it was time for the last meeting of the oversight committee, in which an evaluation paper written by the chair would be circulated and discussed. None of the other committee members had seen it yet. The six of us sat down, copies were passed around, and as our eyes scanned further and further, to my surprise and that of the other members of the committee, it was an excoriation of the work done that year by the field ed student.

Evangelism was nil; no program had been initiated to appeal to the homes in the neighborhood; no committee had been formed to discuss evangelism strategies; nothing had been done to attract young families to the church. All of this should have not only occurred to, but should have been a priority for, the field ed student.

Cursory nods were then given to some of the other aspects of what I'd been involved with that year, but really the church was in no better shape in terms of membership than it had been the year before, and in the shadow of that reality, not much else seemed to matter.

The committee was stunned; I was stunned; and after walking through the rest of the document with a pall over the room, we all shuffled out, looking at our feet,

holding the door limply for each other as we exited.

That was fun.

Within a few days, the other members of the committee did a great deal to counter the effects of that afternoon, which was a great gift. But that one relationship had sustained heavy damage.

It was about a year later when the envelope arrived, stuffed with six densely written pages in which Clay spoke passionately and eloquently about the need for the Church to carry on its mission.

He recounted how dependent he had become on Marge's care for him, writing with frustration about that blasted, withered hand, and how he had finally learned humility when he had become temporarily incapacitated in some other way, and she had had to take care of the most basic things for him.

In so many words, what he was saying, was:

I'm in suspense as to the future of my church.

I'm in suspense as to whether God will bless the Presbyterian Church, or cause it to wither.

I'm in suspense as to what's going to happen to Marge, and I'm in suspense as to whether I'll be here to know about it.

In every way, I feel like I am suspended somewhere between heaven and earth.

There's Absalom, compromised and entirely vulnerable,
the long hair that was his vain pride now entangled in branches,
his once-unblemished, beautiful face wedged into the tree,
and he's suspended there between heaven and earth.

But then, he always was somewhere between heaven and earth.

You can call him the heavenly, avenging angel of his brutalized sister;
or you can call him a bloodthirsty, power-hungry terrorist
against his own father.

Either way, you're not wrong.

Born into a life of paradise,
everything he could need or want being given to him,
he would die trying to take it by force anyway.

He had the heavenly blessing of a father who adored him,
and the earthbound reality of a father
who knew how to command an army effectively
and would do what was necessary to preserve the kingdom.

Call Absalom a lot of things, but unique he is not.

There's us: suspended—literally “in suspense”—

as individual souls whose mortal lives have so much hanging in the balance;

as a complicated local community of Christians, trying to do our best to
interweave the missions and the demands of the different entities we represent;
hoping to work in tandem but really, happy any time we're not working at cross
purposes;

as the universal Church of Jesus Christ, on the threshold of the next 500 years and
as yet having no clear road map to show us what that's going to look like or how
we're going to get there.

And here we are, caught, our beautiful heads wedged into a tight place,
our pride and vanity now inextricably tangled in branches.

Meanwhile, Absalom's father David, against whom he rebelled unrepentantly,
waits just as helplessly, in just as much suspense.

In fact, he's between two places, too: the inner gate and the outer gate.

From inside the inner gate, he not only ruled Israel, but also carried on his private
business: a fascinating mix of the sacred and the sordid. But all of that happened
on the interior.

The outer gate is the one that outsiders could approach—messengers, dignitaries,
scouts returning from a recon mission.

It's patrolled by a *sentinel*—one whose job is to *sense* anything that comes near or takes place nearby.

David waits in agonizing suspense—the kind that a parent knows and learns to live with, but never, ever, ever gets comfortable with.

Did you ever see the commercial a few years ago where there's a five-year-old girl buckling herself into the driver's seat of a parked car, and her Dad is going over all the safety and security instructions, and as the camera cuts back and forth between them, the little girl finally says, "Daddy, *OK...*" And finally he hands her the keys and says, "Be careful." And the camera cuts back to her, but now as the older teenager who she really is, and she says, "Thanks, Dad."

And then David watches as Absalom pulls out of the driveway on his brand new mule and goes off into the world.

Not much in the Bible is more heart wrenching than watching David as each of the two runners approaches, hoping against hope, lying to himself if he has to with false confidence—if there's just one runner, it must be good news for Absalom; if there are two separate runners, surely it's just two different people with the same good news...Please, God; please, God...

Being a parent takes precedence over being a king over a people,
being a commander-in-chief of a military,
being the steward of a country on the world stage.

David could lead people and armies brilliantly and had a direct hotline to God. But the one thing he couldn't do was the one thing he most craved: to be able to be right there at that unforgiving tree, and repeat the order again:
"Be gentle with this young man for my sake,"
or if even that had failed,
to stand in the line of fire and absorb the blows himself.

Every second of our lives, we are suspended between heaven and earth, our vulnerability and mortality exposed.

It is only from that position that we can encounter God in absolute honesty—
no power,
no ability to set the agenda,
no way to rely on our own strength.

Only in that position can we truly consider the deepest and most meaningful questions of our lives:

What does God want for your life?

What does God want you to do?

Who does God want you to be?

That's where God meets us.

Where mortal David, lost in grief, can only say,

“Would that I had died instead of you,”

your Creator God says,

“I am the living bread that came down from heaven.

Whoever eats of this bread will live forever;

and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”

What King David could not do for his beloved, rebellious son,

God has done for us all.

So it's time for us to “put away all bitterness and wrath and anger

and wrangling and slander, together with all malice,

and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another,

as God in Christ has forgiven you, and me.

And let us work harder and better and smarter and with more patience,

to be imitators of God, who in spite of every rebellion we engage in,

chose to die for us rather than letting us perish,

and would never, ever leave you hanging between heaven and earth.

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