

SERMON OF AUGUST 8, 2021

JACK FASHBAUGH

*John 6: 35-51; 2 Samuel 18: 6-18; Ephesians 5: 8b-14*

WORLDLY JUSTICE / ACTUAL PEACE

As you heard our reading this morning from the 18th chapter of *2 Samuel*, you may have felt that you had been dropped into unfamiliar territory - or you may have found that you needed to recall background information that you had learned some time ago. In our reading, King David sends troops out from the city that is not "the City of David," Jerusalem. The city is Mahanaim, a little over forty miles northeast of Jerusalem, as the crow flies. The battle into which David sends his forces is fought in territory north of Judah and south of Galilee, in a place identified as "the Forest of Ephraim." Like the city of Mahanaim, the battle site is probably east of the River Jordan. David's army goes out to fight, we're told, "Israel." Later in the progress of history when "Israel" is not used as a reference to Israel in its entirety it refers to the Northern Kingdom. Here, however, in a time before the division of the nation into Northern and Southern Kingdoms - Israel and Judah, respectively - "Israel" refers to the whole of Israel, to all of the land claimed by all of the 12 Tribes. Though David holds the title "King of Israel," he depends upon an army of his own - a private army - to defeat an army commanded by his son Absalom, who has won the allegiance of the 12 tribes and on this basis claims to be Israel's King.

The characters and circumstances of the drama presented to us by our reading may seem quite remarkable. The Great King David - under whose leadership the Philistines were defeated and tribes in what had been a rather loose confederation were joined to form a nation that rapidly annexed surrounding lands - is now in the position of having to conquer the nation that he himself has created. Though he seems to have the loyalty of his three generals, one of them, Joab, does not hesitate to ignore an emphatically stated order of his king when he kills Absalom. Of course, it is very strange that the son of a great king should become a usurper. And, as if emblemizing the strangeness of the drama, presented to us is the image of Absalom hanging by his hair in the branches of an oak tree.

Our reading gives us the conclusion of a strange chapter in the history of Israel. Despite its apparent strangeness, however, when we consider the chains of actions and reactions that produced it, we may be struck by how easily it is understood. We have all witnessed injustice and possibly experienced being a victim of injustice. We can understand, then, Absalom's anger and resentment twin, as we are told in Chapter 13 of *2 Samuel*, King David failed to execute a just response to the rape of Absalom's sister, Tamar, by Amnon, the half - brother of Absalom and Tamar. After the crime committed against her, Tamar, living in Absalom's house, experienced deep depression. We might imagine that she drifted about in the rooms of Absalom's house like a ghost of the person she had once been. We might imagine that Absalom's rage worked violently on his nerves. Amnon, eldest son of the King, was not made to suffer consequences of what he had done. The great King David ignored the crime, it seemed. After two years, Absalom could contain his rage no longer. He arranged the killing of Amnon. For this act, it seems, Absalom had reason to fear being punished, because he fled from Jerusalem and lived with maternal relatives some distance away for three years. After this time away, Absalom returned to Jerusalem, but for two years he had no personal contact with the King. David exhibited ambivalence: he both wanted and did not want reconciliation with his son. Finally, however, there appeared to be a reconciliation. During the time when father and son were estranged from one another, as the 14th Chapter of *2 Samuel* suggests, Absalom developed a quite obvious narcissistic tendency. His perfect grooming emphasized exceptionally fine features. He cut his hair only when it became too heavy for his comfort. When he cut it, he would weigh it and its weight would be about 5 pounds. It was as if he needed to compensate for feeling deprived of love and respect by making himself an object that he, himself, could love and respect.

The 15th chapter of *2 Samuel* implies that Absalom could not forgive his father's failure to punish Amnon for the crime of raping Tamar, even though Amnon had been dead for some time. In the course of four years, we're told, despite what had happened to be reconciliation with his father, Absalom looked for and took opportunities to undermine the confidence of Israelites in their king - most especially in cases in which citizens had come to Jerusalem to ask David for rulings that would provide justice. What Absalom is represented to have said to petitioners may have some foundation in fact. Absalom would say to petitioners, we were told, "see, your claims are good and right; but there is no one deputed by the king to hear you. 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" (*2 Samuel* 15: 3-4). One receives the impression that David neglected the needs of the Israelites. If we think of a king who is greatly concerned with expanding the boundaries of his domain and was, therefore, engaged often in military and administrative work related to the effort, and if we think of a king who has had a history of direct and not delegated rule, we can understand why it is possible for Absalom to sow seeds of rebellion in a neglected Israelite population. But what Absalom's sold were, indeed, seeds of rebellion. He intended to overthrow his father. One time, one Amnon had raped Tamar and David was doing nothing about it, Absalom felt horribly powerless as he stood by, watching Tamar suffer, deferring to the prerogatives of his king and father. He came to hate his father, possessor of complete power. Trying to work off his anger, he took the extreme step of arranging the murder of Amnon. But this act could not satisfy the hatred for his father that had risen up in him. Compensating for the sense of powerlessness that had once weighed so heavily on him, he *over-compensated* and made it his objective to depose the King. His narcissism, compensation for lacking a sense of self-worth, propelled him forward in a project of rebellion. Having succeeded in undermining the confidence of the Israelites in king David, he exploited the willingness of the Israelites to have a new king, assuming the role for himself.

Ironically, Absalom's response to injustice produced in him, finally, and indifference to justice. For his sense of powerlessness, he tried to compensate, and then he overcompensated. Because he lacked a sense of self-worth, he tried to will into reality a basis for being, not just highly regarded, but supreme. We can't help thinking that the dynamic we have examined is applicable in trying to understand sensational cases of breaches of the peace that we have seen in our society and time. now and then a frustrated, largely ignored individual – often, a young man who has failed to distinguish himself and has felt (we can only imagine) oppressed and powerless – will suddenly make himself very visible by arming himself with tools of destruction – guns and/or bombs – and, indifference for justice, for a day at least award himself supreme power. Not able to use common means of compensating for feelings of weakness and vulnerability, individuals of this kind have undertaken grand acts of over compensation. Their assertions of importance devoid of justice have not, of course, given them peace. But such perpetrators of unjust acts have come to a point where they no longer believe that actual peace is possible.

Our Lord shows the powerless and vulnerable way to find peace. The life of Christ demonstrates God's engagement with human life in times of complete powerlessness and vulnerability. We consider, of course, Christ on the cross - a victim of absolute injustice. Since we are all subject to being powerless victims of injustice, Christ goes to the Cross for all of us. God – in whom is all power and perfect justice - calls us to Himself from Christ's Cross. God reveals Himself as one having full awareness of how it can feel to be a human being. But God also instructs us: Human beings need to learn from the example of Jesus, who demonstrates perfect humility, attentiveness to the Divine Will and courage to live in accord with it. In our Gospel reading this morning, Jesus says, "I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of Him who sent me."

Though Jesus offers the Way to the Kingdom and Eternal Peace, he does not claim for himself absolute power to provide what he offers. He says, "No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me." What

humanity needs – as illustrated at times in very dramatic, sensational ways; as illustrated every day in countless small ways – is the way to find peace as it was established by God through the life of Our Lord and Savior.

Disciples of Christ , *responsive* disciples, recognize the advancement of justice in the world as an obligation. However, as we are told in our reading from *Ephesians* this morning, we Christians are to “live as children of light.” In an *enlightened* state, we understand that we are able to live beyond dreary cycles of crime and punishment that we often observe in human history and in individual biographies. We understand that pursuit of worldly justice does not necessarily yield peace, but that submitting ourselves to justice as God provides it will always bring actual peace.