

August 12, 2018  
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church  
2 Samuel 18:5-9, 15, 31-33

### G-Rated

According to the Motion Picture Association of America, as to its suitability for certain audiences based on content, today's first reading, which is the basis for today's sermon, would not be G-rated. G for general, all ages admitted. G-rated movies must keep violence to a minimum, and it must not be intense, and there can be nothing sexually explicit. But it is almost impossible to talk about today's first reading, a story dripping with violence of all kinds, a story drenched in suffering and ending in a cry of abject grief, and satisfy a G-rating. This is a challenge, because here in this theater we are a general audience. That we do is wonderful, a witness about what Christian community should be—but is also a challenge, and so I will try to choose my words carefully.

American Literature buffs may recall that the great author of the Southern gothic, William Faulkner, has a book that takes its name from this story, the novel *Absalom, Absalom!* But aside from this, Absalom is probably one of the lesser known biblical characters. It's not for lack of material; the saga of Absalom takes up several chapters, each one more gothic than the one before. Nevertheless, according to sequence of readings we've been following this summer, as we progress through the monarchies of ancient Israel focusing in particular on the dynasty of David, we meet Absalom only at the very end of his life, a cry of dereliction as the last word about him.

His death, though, makes no sense apart from what happened before—so a little background is in order. It is a sad and tangled history. Absalom is the son of David, one of David's many sons, by one of David's many wives, and women David made to be his wives. Last week's Old Testament story was of David and Bathsheba, and the son they had, a son born out of lust and murder, a son who died days after being born, and David wept, bitterly. David and Bathsheba would have other children, one of them being Solomon, whom we will hear about in the weeks to come, but David also had other children by various other women, before and no doubt after Absalom. Absalom was one of these other children, and Absalom had a sister, Tamar, whom another one of David's sons entrapped, and abused, and abandoned, abhorred for what he had done to her. It is a horrible story, and it doesn't end there. David heard about what happened, and did nothing. Then, as now, in what comes after a horror—or in the lack of anything happening after such horror—yet more horror is inflicted. Absalom is horrified by this, by all of this, by what happened to his sister by his brother, and perhaps most of all by what his father did not do. Absalom does something about this: Absalom arranges for his brother to be killed. And then Absalom flees. After all this, how could he be part of the kingdom again? And so now David mourns the loss of two more of his sons.

But then David seeks reconciliation with Absalom. Absalom is far away, completely estranged, but he is still alive. He is also still violently vindictive. Absalom, at David's invitation, returns to the kingdom and mounts a covert, and then an overt, revolution against his father. Now it is David who is forced to flee. Absalom takes the throne, seizes it with heinous acts, including against women of David's house, done in public, to make a point, yet more horror. The kingdom is in turmoil, armies of the two sides meet for battle—we're now at the excerpt we have today.

David thinks of all that has been lost, of what might still be lost, he tells the people under his command, "Deal gently for my sake with the young man Absalom." David's caution is not

heeded. Amidst the slaughter of thousands that took place on that day, there is one death that stands out in a particular way. Absalom is riding away and he passes under a tree and his hair gets caught in the branches. His mount rides away and he is left, there hanging. And as he hangs there, from the tree, he is encircled by his opponents. He is struck by his enemies. A spear pierces him. He dies a terrible, a terrible, shameful death. A report of what happened is sent to David. The messenger arrives at the palace, the messenger chooses these words to begin his announcement, this is how he begins his message, “Good tidings!” David’s side has won, after all. But David can only weep, weep and repeat his words of grief. “O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!”

In the typical Hollywood movie, when the bad guys die people cheer. Not here. Who is the bad guy? Who isn’t? Both David and Absalom are broken, and broken-hearted, as all broken people are, as we all are, there is way too much guilt to go around. The story of Absalom and David is flooded with fault, and failure, and foreshadowing.

Foreshadowing, yes—it is not an allegory, there is no one-to-one correspondence, it’s too complex for that, but undeniably in this story there are motifs, themes that will recur in another story, the story of the New Testament: the story of the cross. It is hard not to hear hints of it here in the Old Testament: the story of a father who would rather die than have his children die. A father who so loves his children, children who with the riches of the kingdom at their fingertips make a world of destruction. A story of a cry of dereliction. A death that cannot be understood apart from the life before it. A son who hangs from a tree, surrounded by enemies, pierced with a sword. It is offensive, in some ways, to describe Absalom as a Christ figure—just as it is offensive to compare the deeply-flawed David with God the Father. The great offense of the cross is that that is how God deigns to appear, as one who is despised, that is how God deigns to appear and that that is for whom God dies: for the broken, and the broken-hearted. God’s love, God’s reconciliation, is offensive, offensively limitless, it is for the greatest possible audience, it is G-rated.

Back when my son John was in second grade and we lived down in Hyde Park he became part of an after school activity at the public school he attended. This activity was the Chinese Club. John wasn’t particularly interested in that particular country, but the club met on a day when I really needed After School care. So John joined the Chinese Club, and he had a good time, the club organizers were very nice, it was a group of Chinese mothers who lived in the neighborhood, I think many were immigrants, some might have been here on student visas, they wanted their children to have focused time on Chinese language and culture. And so John did, too. During the after school sessions he made some art projects, copied out his name in special characters, participated in games and parties, including one for Chinese New Year. I remember picking him up after the new year party, he was given a bag of party favors to take home and as one of the club organizers handed it to me she wanted to tell me something. Her English was not terribly good—way better than my Chinese—it was clear she was choosing her words carefully. The party bag had some firecrackers in it; she pointed to them and told me, “They’re not –very– dangerous.”

I told that story because at the end of this sermon I thought we needed an excuse to laugh. And I told it because I think Bible stories are like those firecrackers. And we give them to people of all ages. That’s who they’re for: for people of all ages, people of all walks of life, who have been through, and done things, even horrible things. The story that God writes in the cross is that there is a love that is bigger than that. There is a love that can encompass all we have done, all that we are, all of us, that’s how big God’s love is. That is dangerous.