

DAVID AND HIS FAMILY

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Lindley G. DeGarmo
Union Church of Pocantico Hills
September 5, 2021

Psalm 3
2 Samuel 12:7-12

Last week we heard the story of David and Bathsheba: David's misuse of his power to commit adultery and murder, and how the prophet Nathan confronted the king and tricked him into pronouncing judgment on himself for the evils he had done. David saw what he had become and repented.

Today, I'd like to jump ahead thirteen years (and three chapters) and ask you to envision a scene from 2 Samuel chapter 15. David looks older than his sixty-plus years. His shoulders slump; his head hangs. He shuffles like an old man. He struggles to place one foot in front of the other. He pauses often. Partly because the hill is steep. Partly because he needs to weep.

This is the longest path he's ever walked. Longer than the one from creekside to Goliath. Longer than the winding road from fugitive to king or the guilty road from conviction to confession. Those trails bore some steep turns. But none compare with the ascent up the Mount of Olives. Reading from 2 Samuel 15:30:

So David went up by the ascent of the Mount of Olives, and wept as he went up; and he had his head covered and went barefoot. And all the people who were with him covered their heads and went up, weeping as they went up.

Look carefully and you'll find the cause of David's tears. He wears no crown. His son Absalom has taken it by force. David has no home. Those walls rising to his back belong to the city of Jerusalem. He is fleeing the capital he founded.

Who wouldn't weep at a time like this? No throne. No home. Jerusalem behind him and the wilderness ahead of him. What has happened? Did he lose a war? Was Israel ravaged by disease? Did famine starve his loved ones and drain his strength? How does a king end up old and lonely on an uphill path? Let's see if David will tell us. See how he responds to two simple questions.

Question one: *David, how are things with your children?*

He winces at the subject. Fourteen years have passed since David seduced Bathsheba, thirteen years since Nathan told David, "The sword shall never depart from your house."¹

Nathan's prophecy has proved painfully true. One of David's sons, Amnon, fell in lust with his half-sister Tamar, one of David's daughters by another marriage. Amnon pined and plotted and then finally raped her. After the rape, he discarded Tamar like a worn doll.

Tamar, understandably, came undone. She threw ashes on her head and tore the robe of many colors worn by virgin daughters of the king. She "remained desolate in her brother

¹ 2 Samuel 12:10.

Absalom's house."² The next verse tells us David's response: "When King David heard of all these things, he was very angry."

That's it? That's all? We want a longer verse. We want a few verbs. *Confront* will do. *Punish* would be nice. *Banish* even better. We expect to read, "David was very angry and . . . confronted Amnon or punished Amnon or banished Amnon." But what did David do to Amnon? Nothing. No lecture. No penalty. No imprisonment. No dressing down. No chewing out. David did nothing to Amnon. And, even worse, he did nothing for Tamar. She needed his protection, his affirmation and validation. She needed a dad. What she got was silence. So Absalom, her brother, filled the void. He sheltered his sister and plotted against Amnon: got him drunk and had him killed.

Incest. Deceit. One daughter raped. One son dead. Another son with blood on his hands. A palace in turmoil.

Again it was time for David to step up. Display his Goliath-killing courage, his Saul-pardoning mercy. David's family needed to see the best of David. But they saw none of David. He didn't intervene or respond. He wept. But wept in solitude.

Absalom interpreted the silence as anger and fled Jerusalem to hide in his grandfather's house. David made no attempt to see his son. For three years they lived in two separate cities. Absalom returned to Jerusalem, but David still refused to see him. We are told, "Absalom dwelt two full years in Jerusalem, but did not see the king's face."³ Such shunning could not have been easy. Jerusalem was a small town. Avoiding Absalom demanded daily plotting and spying. But David succeeded in neglecting his son. More accurately, he neglected all his children. David, the Homer Simpson of biblical dads. The picture of passivity. When we ask him about his kids, he just groans.

When we ask him the second question, his face goes chalky: *David, how's your marriage?*

We began to suspect trouble back in 2 Samuel chapter 3. What appears as dull genealogy is actually a parade of red flags. Listen: *Sons were born to David at Hebron. The first was Amnon, whose mother was Ahinoam from Jezreel. The second son was Kileab, whose mother was Abigail, the widow of Nabal from Carmel. The third son was Absalom, whose mother was Maacah daughter of Talmai, the king of Geshur. The fourth son was Adonijah, whose mother was Haggith. The fifth son was Shephatiah, whose mother was Abital. The sixth son was Ithream, whose mother was Eglah, David's wife. These sons were born to David at Hebron.*⁴

I count six wives. Add to this list Michal, his first wife, and Bathsheba, his most famous, and David had eight spouses—too many to give each one a day a week. The situation worsens as we uncover a passage buried in the family Bible of David. After listing the names of his sons, the genealogist adds, "These were all the sons of David, besides the sons of the concubines."⁵

The concubines? David fathered other children through other mothers, and we don't even know how many. The cynical side of us wonders if David did. What was he thinking? Yes, he

² 2 Samuel 13:20.

³ 2 Samuel 14:28.

⁴ 2 Samuel 3:2-5 (NCV).

⁵ 1 Chronicles 3:9.

was king. Yes, polygamy was considered perfectly natural in those days. But what was he thinking?

David did so much so well. He unified the twelve tribes into one nation. He masterminded military conquests. He founded the capital city and elevated God as the Lord of the people, bringing the ark to Jerusalem and paving the way for the temple. He wrote poetry we still read and psalms we still sing. But when it came to his family, David blew it.

Going AWOL on his family was David's greatest failure. Seducing Bathsheba was an inexcusable but explicable act of passion. Murdering Uriah was a ruthless yet predictable deed from a desperate heart. But passive parenting and widespread philandering? These were not sins of a slothful afternoon or the deranged reactions of self-defense. David's family foul-up was a lifelong stupor that cost him dearly.

If you question that assessment, read the rest of the David story. Take Absalom for instance. David finally reunited with him, but it was too late. The seeds of bitterness had spread deep roots. Absalom resolved to overthrow his father. He recruited from David's army and staged a coup. His takeover set the stage for the sad walk of David out of Jerusalem—up the Mount of Olives and into the wilderness. No crown. No city. Just a heavyhearted, lonely, old man. The Bible says: *So David went up by the ascent of the Mount of Olives, and wept as he went up; and he had his head covered and went barefoot.*⁶

Soldiers loyal to David eventually chase Absalom down. When he tries to escape on horseback, his long hair tangles in a tree, and soldiers spear him. David hears the news and falls to pieces:

*“O my son Absalom—my son, my son Absalom—if only I had died in your place! O Absalom my son, my son!”*⁷

Sincere, heart-breaking tears. But tardy tears. David succeeded everywhere except at home. And if you don't succeed at home, do you succeed at all? David would have benefited from the counsel of Paul the apostle: “And now a word to you fathers. Don't make your children angry by the way you treat them.”⁸

How do we explain David's disastrous home? How do we explain David's silence when it comes to his family? No psalms written about his children. Surely, out of all his wives, one was worthy of a sonnet or song. But he never talked about them. Aside from the prayer he offered for Bathsheba's baby, Scripture gives no indication that he ever prayed for his family. He prayed about the Philistines, interceded for his warriors. He offered prayers for Jonathan, his friend, and for Saul, his archrival. But as far as his family is concerned, it's as if they never existed. Was David too busy to notice them? Maybe. He had a city to settle and a kingdom to build. Was he too important to care for them? ‘Let the wives raise the kids; I'll lead the nation.’ Was he too guilty to shepherd them? After all, how could David, who had seduced Bathsheba and intoxicated and murdered Uriah, correct his sons when they raped and murdered? Too busy. Too important. Too guilty. And now? Too late. A dozen exits too late.

⁶ 2 Samuel 15:30.

⁷ 2 Samuel 18:33.

⁸ Ephesians 6:4 (NLT).

But it's not too late for you. Your home is your giant-size privilege, your towering priority. Do not make David's tragic mistake. How would you respond to the questions we asked him?

How's your marriage?

Be fiercely loyal to one spouse. *Fiercely* loyal. Don't even look twice at someone else. Build him up; don't tear her down. Take time to listen to one another, to share your hopes and dreams and fears. Support each other in excellence. Pray together. (And you know, that doesn't necessarily kneeling together by your bedside at night. When you sit here, side by side on Sunday morning, you are praying together!)

And, as you do, nourish the children God gives.

How are things with your kids?

Quiet heroes dot the landscape of our society. They don't wear ribbons or kiss trophies; they wear spit-up and kiss boo-boos. They don't make the headlines, but they do sew the hemlines and check the outlines and stand on the sidelines. You won't find their names on the Nobel Prize short list, but you will find their names on the homeroom, carpool, and Church School teacher lists.

They are parents, both by blood and deed, name and calendar. Heroes. News programs don't call them. But that's okay. Because their kids do . . . They call them Mom. They call them Dad. And these moms and dads, more valuable than all the executives and lawmakers this side of the Mississippi, quietly hold the world together.

Be numbered among them. Read books to your kids. Play ball while you can and they want you to. Make it your aim to watch every game they play, read every story they write, hear every recital in which they perform.

Children spell love with four letters: T-I-M-E. Not just quality time, but hang time, downtime, anytime, all the time. Your children are not your hobby; they are your calling.

Your spouse is not your trophy but your treasure.

Don't pay the price David paid. Can we flip ahead a few chapters to his final hours? To see the ultimate cost of a neglected family, look at the way our hero dies.

David is hours from the grave. A chill has set in that blankets can't remove. Servants decide he needs a person to warm him, someone to hold him tight as he takes his final breaths.

Do they turn to one of his wives? No. Do they call on one of his children? No. They seek *"for a lovely young woman throughout all the territory of Israel . . . and she cared for the king, and served him; but the king did not know her."*⁹

I suspect that David would have traded all his conquered crowns for the tender arms of a wife. But it was too late. He died in the care of a stranger, because he made strangers out of his family.

But it's not too late for us.

⁹ 1 Kings 1:3-4.

Your family is your greatest treasure. Make sure they know it. Love them. Cherish them. Nourish them. Succeed at home first.

To the Lord our God, Alpha and Omega, be all glory and honor forever. Amen.