

Holy Curiosity: Things PKs Think Are Cool

May 1, 2022

Bendersville & Wenksville United Methodist Churches

2 Samuel 18:1-18

So today we are continuing a super-fun series of messages titled “Holy Curiosity” – where the scriptures and the topics that we are covering for the next month and a half (or so) have been specially requested by you, members of the congregation.

Today’s topic is maybe a little, teensy bit different, though, because instead of giving me a little peek into the things that you all have questions about, this one gives you just a little peek into the interior world of a pastor’s family. Because today’s scripture reading was specially – and repeatedly – naggingly – loudly – requested by my son. And there is a little bit of me that thinks that this might be my pre-teen’s way of “getting even with mom” – because if I were reading through the Bible trying to find something to preach on, this story would absolutely *not* have made the cut.

But my kid loves adventure stories. And stories that are a little bit off-beat and surprising. He has an illustrated comic book Bible at home that is basically his go-to Bible of choice, because he *loves* comics, and one day he was thumbing through his Bible and came across this passage in 2 Samuel.

My son Samuel has always been drawn to the books of 1 and 2 Samuel (I wonder why...), and all of a sudden he came face-to-face with a picture of a man named Absalom hanging from a tree by his hair. And his first reaction was “WOW! What in the world is *that*?! *That*’s in the Bible?! I wanna read *that* story! And why has mom never preached on it?! She’s been holding out on me!!!”

So, there you have it, parents. If you ever wanted to get your older elementary and pre-teen kids interested in reading the Bible, get them a comic book Bible and direct them to the Old Testament. But I need to offer a disclaimer: I make absolutely no guarantees about what they may see or learn, because a lot of the Old Testament is definitely not rated PG. This story, in fact, is not PG.

So, to get into today’s story about Absalom, we need to back up a little bit into the story of King David, that we started last week. King David is somebody who I could probably preach a full-blown sermon series on, all on his own. He is one of those characters whose story is big. Huge. Monumental. It spans two books of the Old Testament, with ripples into several more, and his legacy was one which would shape the people of Israel – for good and for bad – for the rest of time.

And King David was also profoundly human. He had amazing successes; great triumphs; powerful faithful moments, and he had big flaws. Horrible missteps. Painful struggles.

The old adage that the higher someone rises the harder they fall really rings true with David.

On the one hand, we see David described as a “man after God’s own heart.” There was something about him that was deeply plugged-in to who God was. God hand-selected David from a young age to be Israel’s next king. Even though God didn’t want Israel to have a king in the first place, if they *were* going to have a king, God wanted it to be David.

As we saw in our story last week in the famous and timeless story of David and Goliath, David was downright fearless. When all of the trained warriors were running for the hills when the Philistines presented the giant Goliath as their mighty warrior, David didn’t even blink. He faced down Goliath with no armor or protection whatsoever – just a slingshot and some pebbles from the river and a deep faith in a God who had never yet failed to protect his people.

David is credited with writing a good number of the Psalms in the book of Psalms – beautiful and powerful and sometimes uplifting and other times heart wrenching prayers to God. His prayer life was deep and it was powerful.

But then, David had another side to him as well, that we see in the second-most-famous story of King David. And that side comes out when David has been serving as king for a good while, and all of a sudden, his power and his influence starts to go to his head. As it will, for anyone who holds the office of king too long.

He accidentally catches a glimpse of a beautiful woman bathing and decides that he has to have her. Never mind that she is already married, to a noble and high-ranking officer in his own army. Never mind the impossible and life-threatening position that puts *her* in. What he wants, he takes, and then he goes to great lengths to cover it up.

Which sort-of works, except – remember – David is a man after God’s own heart. He has spent his whole life deeply plugged-in to God. And as it turns out, God happens to have seen what happened (imagine that). And God wasn’t going to let him off the hook so easily.

And so God sends the prophet Nathan to confront David about it. And once David realizes that his misdeed did not go unnoticed and it is now out in the open, he repents. He feels *terrible* about it. He tries to do what he can to make it right, but he has already done so much damage, that there is not much that he can do to put things right again.

And there is another old adage – this one happens to be from scripture, although it wouldn’t be written until many years later. And this one says that “not many should presume to be teachers, because we know that those who teach will be judged more strictly.” I think that that bit of wisdom can apply also to kings and rulers and leaders of

just about any kind. It certainly rang true for David. Because we saw that God's punishment for David was swift, and it was severe.

First, the child that he and Bathsheba conceived together would die. Second, because he took another man's wife in secret, his own wives would be taken from him, in public and humiliating ways. And third, because he struck down Bathsheba's husband, God tells David that "the sword will never depart from your house." Meaning, your children will always be at one another's throats, and they will destroy one another from within.

And *that* is what brings us to our story from today. A story that, quite frankly, I struggled with figuring out how to preach. Because even though it might be an alluring story for an 11-year-old boy, it is not a fun story. It is a painful one. With gruesome details vividly described, and no happy ending. It is tragic, in every sense of the word.

Why in the world the editors of my son's Bible decided to illustrate *this* particular story is beyond me. Except, that it is part of the Bible. It is part of the story of the Israelite people. It is part of *our* story as children of God. And as much as we might sometimes like to paper over the messy parts of our story, it is still part of our story – part of God's story – and so we still have to grapple with it, uncomfortable though it might be.

So, here's what happened. And I will warn you, this story does get R rated.

King David finally wound up having at least 20 sons with different wives and concubines, not counting the one who died, and not counting his daughters. Most of David's kids we don't know anything about, apart from their names. But there are a few who are major players in his story.

First, we have Amnon, David's firstborn.

Chileab was David's second son, but we don't hear much of anything about him and think that he may have died young.

Absalom is David's third son,
and Adonijah is his fourth son.

Also of note are Solomon, David's youngest son with Bathsheba, and one daughter, Tamar.

So one day, David's oldest son and the heir to the throne, Amnon, does the unthinkable and he takes advantage of his half-sister, Tamar. Tamar confides this to her brother Absalom, and ultimately David gets wind of what had happened. But because Amnon was his first and favorite son, David does nothing. And that makes Absalom's blood boil. And he vows to avenge his sister.

So first, Absalom kills his brother Amnon. And then, he leads a rebellion against his father the king. Unfortunately for Absalom, that rebellion is not successful. And as Absalom is fleeing on horseback from David's soldiers, his long hair gets caught up in the dense tree branches overhead and he is left dangling from the tree, from his hair. Then the commander of David's army finds him hanging there and kills him.

So, that's the end of Absalom. But that's not the end of the story. David is – understandably – distraught. By now, he has lost at least three (maybe four) sons. And all he can do is weep, miserably. David has zero fight left in him. He has basically lost his ability to lead, or to govern; lost his will to live. And he spirals into a pit of despair.

But there is one final royal edict that David manages to issue, before he dies. And that is that his son Solomon should be the one to succeed him as king.

Never mind that now with four older brothers out of the way, Solomon is now at least 7th in line for the throne – maybe even further down the line. Doesn't matter. David sees and God confirms that Solomon is the one with the leadership skills and the wisdom and the heart to do the job. And so before David's death, he has the prophet Nathan anoint Solomon as king.

Which doesn't go over very well with Solomon's big brother Adonijah, who was supposed to be the next in line. Despite what his father had said, after David's death, Adonijah tries to appoint himself as king; tries to usurp the throne...but is ultimately removed. And there Solomon reigned until his death, at which time his own sons would mount war and battle and insurrection against one another and the kingdom of Israel would split in two.

Cheery, isn't it?

So, here's the thing. Besides the fact that preacher's kids have a bizarre taste for weird and deeply-unsettling Bible stories.

Not all stories that we find in scripture are stories like David and Goliath, where the little guy slays the big bad giant. Or stories like Ezekiel and the valley of dry bones, where the dead bones form flesh and blood and come alive again. Or stories like Moses, where a condemned criminal leads a whole people out of slavery and into the Promised Land.

Not all stories in scripture end with Jesus multiplying the food or calming the storms or rising from the dead. There are some stories – like the story of King David – that start beautifully, and end tragically.

The good news in David's story is that it didn't take him all that long to realize where he had gone wrong, and he was very ready to repent and turn around and not make the same mistake again. He was able to put his relationship with God right again. But the

damage in his personal life had been done. And from that point on, he may have been the king – the man after God’s own heart – the one who had been hand-selected by God himself from the time he was just a boy to lead the people of Israel, but he was also a man who had to learn the hard way that actions have consequences, even (and perhaps especially) for leaders. That life is messy. And sometimes, life is really, *really* hard. Some days, on the hardest days, it is all we can do to just put one foot in front of the other and keep moving forward because the pain of right now is just so great.

And yet, even in these moments – even in the times when it feels like everything is crashing down around us and nothing is going right and the world is just so broken and messy that we aren’t even sure if we want to be a part of it anymore – even in these darkest of dark times, we are still (and forever remain) children after God’s own heart.

We are still people who are called to a life of deep prayer. Even if our prayers don’t change the immediate circumstances that we find ourselves in, we are still called to offer ourselves before God, knowing that if nothing else, God will be with us in it. And sometimes, God will give us moments of clarity in the midst of the confusion.

We are still people who are called to live with integrity and lead with wisdom. Even if there are bumps and blemishes in our past that are still having a chaotic impact on our present. God reminds us that we are not the sum of our worst mistakes, and God is a God who gives us second and third and fourth chances to get things right.

And we are still people who are called to bring glimmers of God’s hope and joy into a world that is so often punctuated with pain and suffering. Reminding ourselves and the world around us that even when life gets really, really hard, there are still places of God’s beauty all around us, if we would just open our eyes and see it. And so, we bring out our harp and lyre, or our keyboard and guitar, or maybe just our really bad singing-in-the-shower voice, and in the tradition of King David, lift up a song of praise to God, just because. And that song of praise may just lift our spirits enough - give us enough gratitude and enough strength for today to be able to face the uphill climb in front of us.