

## God's Game of Thrones: *Two Dead Princes* 2 Samuel 18:5-33

I have to admit that this week's image of Absalom caught in a tree with his legs dangling reminded me of a 3 Stooges movie. And as my Bible Professors used to say, such weird and unbelievable events are most likely historical as one writing a fictional account would dismiss it as unrealistic. But alas, Absalom's death at the hand of Joab's men took all the humor out and reminded me that the Game of Thrones is a dangerous one indeed. Joab's disregard for King David's order to go easy on Absalom seems odd to us, but part of the reason for this is because we don't know, "the rest of the story," as Paul Harvey used to say.

Years before Absalom's death, his brother by another Mother – and that is not a slang term, I mean that literally, scripture says Absalom's brother, Amnon was "so tormented he made himself ill" in his desire for Absalom's biological sister, Tamar. Though Tamar is Amnon's half sister, he could have asked the King for her hand in marriage, which is unusual even in that time, but still allowed, But instead of pursuing this honorable route, Amnon lets a friend convince him to trick her into coming to his bedroom by feigning to be sick. He does this and even though Tamar tells him she would be happy to marry him, and she begs him not to force himself on her, Amnon rapes her.

Sadly, even after Amnon's brutal act of violence, in that time, he could have still saved himself and even her reputation had he taken her as a wife, but the Bible says that after the rape, Amnon was "seized with loathing for her... even greater than the lust he had felt for her." And he told his servants to "put this woman out and bolt the door after her." Tamar is devastated, in tears she tells her brother Absalom and covered her head in ashes –her status as a marry-able Princess of David destroyed. David was very angry at this, but because Amnon was his first-born and heir to the throne, David would not punish him. And so Absalom quietly took defense of his sister into his own hands. Two years later, with David's consent, Absalom invites all his brothers to a party and after Amnon is drunk Absalom gives the signal to his servants to kill him. Knowing he is in danger for this act Absalom

then escapes to another country. David mourns Amnon deeply, but after a while he also yearns for his handsome son Absalom. But thinking it would not be right to welcome back a murderer to the King's house, he will not send for him. So his commander Joab, knowing how David missed Absalom, arranges for way for David to do it by compelling a woman to come and tell David a story of her life in which one of her sons kills another, and she begged him to assure the son she missed would be safe if he came home. David grants her request making strong statements about his protection as King and then she makes him realize it is really King David's story. So David sends for Absalom but for 2 years David would not see him. Finally Absalom begs Joab to ask if he can come back to the King's household, which a weeping David allows and the reunion is complete.

So here we are with a happy ending after a violent beginning with Absalom. These events sound like a more intense version of Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son. But this is not the end. Absalom, even after being shown mercy by David, after he again roams the streets hailed as a prince – Absalom begins to plot to overthrow his Father, King David and actually attempts a rebellion. David is ready to capitulate, but his servants, even those who are foreigners beg him to maintain his throne. And he agrees to this, but also gives the order to spare Absalom. But David's commander Joab, the one who had plotted and arranged for Absalom's return, who got David to receive him back, Commander Joab knew that Absalom who had murdered his brother with treachery and who had raised up troops against his father was not to be trusted, and he ordered his men to kill him. And so now we hear the rest of the story. A sad story that makes it clear that God was right about David seeing his own household bring shame on him and betraying him.

So why are we going through these stories week after week? It helps us understand that people are indeed just the same today as in the time of the Bible. People are capable of terrible things when they let their desires rule them. Amnon's rape of his half-sister, Tamar is a horrible act of violence that is about power, about him gratifying his desire, lust for her in spite of her offer of marriage.

And the lack of honor or love or care behind the act is made clear when he reveals his new disdain for her in the most vile tones as he banishes her from his bedroom.

King David, though angry at the violation of his daughter, Tamar, does not punish Amnon in any way. Why? I am not sure. Is it a character flaw of being too lenient with his sons; or a strategy to keep in his sons' good graces in the Game of Thrones, Whatever the reason; it does him no good.

Absalom, understandably angry at Amnon, does not seek the King's justice, does not directly confront Amnon, but instead bides his time, and two years later has him assassinated at a feast. And then after receiving mercy from his Father, he has the gaul to lead a revolution against him.

All of these failings are based on desire – Desire for sexual gratification, desire for peace in the house, desire for justice, desire for mercy, and desire for power. None of the objects of desire are bad in themselves – sex is a gift of God when done in the proper loving way, peace, justice, mercy are all positive things, even power is necessary to accomplish good in the world, but when desire for these things overwhelms us so we lose sight of the ethical and moral paths to them, then we are not fulfilling our desires, but rather we are being driven by them to do their will.

Please know I am not suggesting that all decisions are clear and easy, but God's Game of Thrones shows us that we must always have a part of ourselves far enough away from our egos and desires to help us keep on the pathway of love. It is not so easy to do this, we would rather just indulge ourselves, but even though none of us are kings or queens, we can cause havoc in our own lives and the lives of others when we live our lives uncritically doing just what we feel like doing in the moment.

I don't know if there are any Star Trek fans out there, but all the scriptural accounts of desire and betrayal reminded me of an episode where Spock appears

to kill Captain Kirk in a hormone-driven rage during a ritual which determines who will wed Spock's betrothed- T'Pring. T'Pring tricks Spock into battling Kirk because she knows win or lose Spock will not marry her, and she will be able to marry the one she desires, who is himself at the event thinking he would be her champion, not Kirk. After overpowering Kirk, as Spock leaves to turn himself in for the murder of the Captain, he talks to T'Pring and compliments the logic of her choosing Kirk as her champion. Then Spock turns to her lover, Stonn and says to him this: "After a time, you may find that having is not so pleasing a thing after all as wanting. It is not logical, but it is often true."

Spock's analysis of the human (and even Vulcan) ability to be overcome with desire reminds us all that living a life of peace and justice and love requires us to put a bridle on desire, not because they are evil, but because if they control us, they may lead us where we really don't want to go. May God's grace give us strength to live well and God's love give us power to love one another. AMEN

2 Samuel 18:5-9, 15, 31-33

The king gave orders to Joab and Abishai and Ittai, saying, "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. So the army went out into the field against Israel; and the battle was fought in the forest of Ephraim. The men of Israel were defeated there by the servants of David, and the slaughter there was great on that day, twenty thousand men. The battle spread over the face of all the country; and the forest claimed more victims that day than the sword. Absalom 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.

And ten young men, Joab's armor-bearers, surrounded Absalom and struck him, and killed him. Then 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." The 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." The 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 that I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!"