

Absalom, O Absalom

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I love stories. Silly stories, sexy stories, simple stories, complex stories, sad stories, happy stories. And I'm not alone. We live in a culture that loves stories so much, even reality shows have to be partially scripted to get us to watch. This love of story is why we go to movies, subscribe to the *New Yorker*, listen to *This American Life*.

And I was fortunate because I had parents that encouraged me and didn't mind paying out when the scholastic book club flyer came home and didn't ever put any of their books on a shelf I couldn't reach. The problem was that my parents were of the very firm belief that kids should not read during the Sunday worship service, and so I was not allowed to bring a book with me. This was torture. Because after you have read the bulletin and paged through the hymnal again and maybe read the church council minutes, there was not much left except for the Bible. So I started paging through it to see if I could find anything interesting. And what did I find!

Let me say this right now so there is no mistake: the Bible is no book for the young. Despite what we have tried to do with picture books full of chubby-cheeked children and a demurely naked Eve with her breasts covered by well-placed long hair and the cheerful happy-ending rainbow, the Bible is full of dangerous, scary, awful stuff, especially the Old Testament. These people! Mad men and wild women, jealous wives, vindictive brothers, donkey-beaters, murderers, rapists, drunkards, black-art practitioners and whiners. And those are

the good guys. In fact, the only thing that distinguishes the good guys from the bad ones is that the good ones usually manage some form of last-minute redemption that saves either Israel from total annihilation or themselves from a God-given smiting.

But that is what makes the Old Testament stories so great to read. Old Testament characters are drawn — with few exceptions — in deeply varying shades of gray. A king is the hero in one chapter and a villain in the next; prophets are voices crying in the wilderness and, yet, also at the same time, sanctimonious snits (I'm talking to you Hosea); women are making vows of fidelity to their mother-in-law one day and then the next day uncovering some guy's feet on the threshing room floor.

Is this a reason that Mennonites don't preach from the Old Testament much? All that "hey I'm good in this chapter and bad in this next one" makes it hard to pick out the moral theme. Jesus had a pretty basic one going on (love) but the OT is all over the place. Or maybe it's the graphic imagery that we can't do. Ezekiel 23 for example, takes a little while to digest and The Song of Songs is just a whole lot of sex. Or maybe it is all the violence; violence which makes the movie *300* look like a Disney straight-to-video flick. Violence with which we are deeply, deeply uncomfortable. We like to say that Jesus came to do a new way but it doesn't actually mean that those stories or those questions of violence go away.

A few months ago, when it was my turn to lead the discussion in my small group, I asked them to pick their favorite Old Testament stories. Turns out that it

was a more difficult than I had anticipated...for a variety of reasons — some having to do with unfamiliarity of any but the big basic ones and some having to do with the fact that they are uncomfortable stories. Not a lot of happy endings, not a lot of good things, not a lot of moral clarity and an awful lot of smiting. I, however, was able to come up with five. Don't worry; I'm not going to talk you through all five today (although if we don't find a preacher for mid-September, you might get your chance). I am however, going to walk us through my favorite one.

Once upon a time, a son of David — Amnon — rapes his half-sister, Tamar, after he tricks her into taking care of him while he was “sick.” He doubles his wrongs by discarding her after, and she tears her clothes and weeps. Her full brother — Absalom — sees her distress and moves Tamar into his household, but tells her to accept what happened because Amnon was her brother. Despite what he has told Tamar though, Absalom is furious and doesn't speak to Amnon again. King David is furious too, but he doesn't do anything about it.

A couple of years later, Absalom invites the king to his sheep shearing party. The king declines, but agrees to send Amnon and the rest of the king's adult sons in his place. While all the brothers are as drunk as frat boys at an all-night kegger, Absalom orders his men to kill Amnon. Chaos ensues; David's sons scatter, messages about a royal massacre are coming back to the capital, everyone is in mourning, Absalom flees. Finally, the story comes out: “Only Amnon is dead. This has been Absalom's expressed intention ever since the day Amnon raped his sister Tamar.”

Time passes. David eventually moves to the last stage of grief over Amnon, but Absalom stays away, self-exiled to a foreign land under a foreign king. Finally, after a little political maneuvering by Joab, David's Rovian chief of staff, David is convinced (although it doesn't take much) to have Absalom brought back home. The condition however, is that while Absalom is welcome back in Jerusalem, he must not attend on the king.

The story takes a break to inform us, by the way, that Absalom is gorgeous. Brad Pitt and Denzel Washington and Channing Tatum all rolled into one blemish-free package. I'm not making this up. It's in the Bible. Oh, and he had really long hair. Keep that detail in mind for later. This is what is commonly called "foreshadowing."

So Absalom has now lived in Jerusalem for a few years, had a few kids and still hasn't seen his father, the King. This annoys him. He puts in a request to Joab, and Joab — knowing full well who signs his paychecks — ignores him. He asks again, and Joab ignores him again. So Absalom reacts in the calm, rational manner we've come to know and love. He sets Joab's fields on fire. Joab decides to stop ignoring Absalom and takes him to David, both aware that the king can put Absalom to death immediately...but instead the king kisses him welcome. So more time passes. Absalom gets himself a small army. He also begins to engage in some fairly aggressive politicking. As people came into the city to bring complaints to the king, Absalom welcomes them, hears their stories, shakes their hands, kisses their foreheads and then points out that despite the validity of their claims, there is no one who will hear their plea. "Oh, if only *I* were a judge, then I

would ensure justice for you.” Well, surprising no one, his poll numbers dramatically increase.

After about four years of this stealth campaigning, Absalom creates an excuse to get out of Jerusalem. David says “Sure. Whatever” and Absalom goes to Hebron. He turns it into a bit of a party, inviting 200 other men and some of David’s inner circle and proceeds to crown himself king of Hebron. In Jerusalem, David’s director of polling comes to him and says, “yea, the Israelites aren’t so into you anymore; but you should see Absalom’s numbers.” David, looking at his options, decides to leave the city. So David takes himself and his entourage and heads out of town all the way to the Mount of Olives, crying the whole way. Even running into an old-school Saul supporter doesn’t get his mind off his troubles; when David’s men want to kill the guy, David says “don’t...my own son wants me dead. How could this guy’s curses be worse than that?” David isn’t totally out of it though; he manages to disinherit the son of the only man he ever loved and implant a spy in Absalom’s circle of advisors.

This spy ends up being a pretty good move. He starts to give advice to Absalom — really bad advice. Things like “sleep with all of your dad’s concubines in front of everyone” and “don’t do any sudden, surprise attacks...take the time to build a really, really big army. Oh, and you should definitely lead those men into battle yourself.” Meanwhile, David’s men advise him to sit tight because no one cares if some soldiers die, but if the King were to fall, it would be disastrous. Before his commanders go marching out though, David pulls them all aside and tells them to “be gentle with the young man Absalom for my sake.”

Off the men go, and there is a great battle. Thousands of men die; thousands and thousands of men. And Absalom's army loses. Loses badly. And Absalom himself loses.

Because as he was riding his mule and going under a tree, his long thick hair tangles in some branches and his mule goes on without him. As a kid and even now, I have some serious issues with this plot point. I've never seen someone with hair so long and so thick that it would enable dangling from trees. Do mules really go that fast? This whole setup seems unlikely and maybe an editor needed to call foul on the writer. But nonetheless, the scene as originally written has been left to stand and so on we go.

As Absalom is dangling there, he is noticed by one of David's soldiers, who goes to inform Joab who is understandably upset. "Why didn't you kill him there? I'd have given you some money and a medal."

"Are you insane?" replies the soldier. "I wouldn't kill the king's son for a million dollars. I heard him tell you not to harm him. And if I had killed him, you would have avoided me like the plague." Joab says "Forget that. I'm not going to wait around for Absalom to die a natural death" and he takes three spears and plunges them into Absalom and then has his men finish him off. Joab sounds the trumpet, the battle ends, and Absalom is thrown into a pit with some rocks on top to mark the spot.

Someone has to tell the king the news that his army has won. There's actually a volunteer, but Joab thinks that's a bad idea. "Some other time you can deliver the news; today is not your day. A prince has died." Instead, Joab makes

some poor Cushite run with it, knowing that David is indeed the type to kill the messenger. But the first volunteer is annoyed and begs and Joab says “Fine. Go!” Turns out that the first volunteer was faster and ends up beating the Cushite to David anyway. David is hopeful to see both messengers, and they deliver the news that David’s army has carried the day. “But what about my son?” asks David. The first guy feigns ignorance: “I don’t know...it was so confusing, lots of people milling around, I don’t know what was going on there.”

The Cushite has to be the one to break the news. The young man Absalom, avenger of Tamar, the handsomest man in all the land, a prince of Israel, the son of David, is dead.

And the king weeps. “O my son Absalom! My son, my son Absalom! If only I had died instead of you — O Absalom, my son, my son!” And the victory becomes like ashes to the army because the king is in mourning for his child. There is an epilogue. David has to come back to Jerusalem; amends must be made, the son of the man he loved is re-inherited, there are more battles and some more political maneuvering. But the story of Absalom is over.

It's a good story. There's some solid epic sweep to it, jumping from the capital city to the Mount of Olives, a clashing battle in a forest. There are moral complexities galore. Is Absalom a hero for revenging his sister, sympathetic for his anger at his father’s inaction, a villain for murdering his brother and amassing a giant army to kill his father, a traitor to his king? There's also a cast of thousands with interesting side characters — none more so than Joab who deserves his own book for the loyalty to, betrayals of and eventually betrayals by

his king. It's got some suspense; were all the sons killed or not? Will the spy get Absalom to listen to him? It's got a great closing line; "Absalom, O Absalom, I would have died for thee." But despite all that is has going for it, it apparently isn't enough to keep telling it from our pulpits and in our Sunday schools and our Bible picture books.

So maybe this story needs to die; maybe there is nothing in it for us at all. What does a bunch of ancient political maneuverings, sexual and familial violence, revenge and attempted regicide have to do with us in our modern, Twittering, 21st Century world? Nothing? But I don't believe that. And if a couple of years of grad school literary theory taught me anything it was that a story, no matter how old, can always use another look.

We could take a feminist look at it: The rape of Tamar as a politically-motivating trigger, and the woman's body as pawn in the male-centric world of kingdom. Or maybe a Freudian interpretation: the primacy of the maternal tie over the paternal and the Oedipal instinct of patricide. If I had done better in my contemporary literary theory class, I could even attempt to give you a deconstructive interpretation. But I did poorly and so won't.

The above theories don't quite do the trick for me, though, so I need to take another look ...a little bit more personal. So here goes the Zookian theory. I'm not a parent, but I am the child of some. And what I see is a child who has done awful, awful things — to his family, to his people, to his king. Terrible, hideous things. The lying and the manipulating and the killing. Things for which I think there can be no forgiveness and no grace. And yet David says, "my son, my

son, I would have died for thee.” This story becomes the ultimate example of a parent's love. Not that the parent excuses what the child did or in any way attempts to mitigate the consequences of his actions, but instead mourns, weeps, laments and would willingly take the child's place in death. Even more than the story of the prodigal son in the New Testament, I think this is about what unconditional love must look like — for this son never repents, never crawls home in shame, never asks or seeks forgiveness even when hanging by his hair from a tree and David's army surrounds him.

Furthermore, I see it as a metaphor — and probably doing something terribly wrong theologically by interpreting it this way — of God's love. As a people, we do terrible, terrible things to each other. Awful, hideous, unimaginable things on the largest scale and the smallest. And so there are consequences — few of which are pleasant. And yet, God says to each of us, “oh, my child, my child, I would die in your place.” If you are one of those people that like to take the Christological approach to the OT, you could say that God sending Jesus is the fulfillment of this very lament. I don't necessarily go quite that far, but I will say that reading it in that context does provide a pleasing thematic completeness to our story of God's love. Even the most unlovable among us is loved and mourned by God, and God would willingly take the place at death of any one of us. God weeps for those for whom no one else weeps.

In closing, I would hope to leave with you a sense that these stories are still worthy of our engagement. And I would hope that we continue to struggle with them and attempt interpretation of them that keeps them alive for us. And I

applaud those that are actively doing this — like Cindy's series on the Genesis women last year and the study on Ruth and Naomi at the Allegheny Conference last week. I hope we can continue to do this kind of engagement — in our small groups, in our pulpits, in our own families. Because these stories hold truths for us; we just have to dig a little to find them sometimes.