

“Impossible Choices”
2 Samuel 18:5-15; 31-33
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At least some of you have been enjoying this sermon series on the life of King David. Others, no doubt, are ready to move on. I promise we will conclude next week with a story of Solomon, one of David's sons.

One lady commented last week how much she's enjoyed learning more about David, and how it's actually prompted her to get out her Bible and read it to fill in the blanks. Imagine that! The Word of God can be edifying, challenging, mystifying, and comforting. The thing is, we have to open our Bible and read it.

As we continue to contemplate David's story this week, we encounter David's son Absalom. Absalom has led a revolt against David. David's troops are going out to battle. David has some last minute instructions for his commanders. Let's now listen for God's word to us in this tragic story from the 2nd book of Samuel.

The king ordered 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. A man saw it, and told Joab, "I saw Absalom hanging in an oak." Joab said to the man who told him, "What, you saw him! Why then did you not strike him there to the ground? I would have been glad to give you ten pieces of silver and a belt."

But the man said to Joab, "Even if I felt in my hand the weight of a thousand pieces of silver, I would not raise my hand against the

king's son; for in our hearing the king commanded you and Abishai and Ittai, saying: For my sake protect the young man Absalom! On the other hand, if I had dealt treacherously against his life then you yourself would have stood aloof." Joab said, "I will not waste time like this with you." He took three spears in his hand, and thrust them into the heart of Absalom, while he was still alive in the oak. And ten young men, Joab's armor-bearers, surrounded Absalom and struck him, and killed him.

(we break and continue in verse 31, when news of Absalom's death reaches David) 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 I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!"

Ours is a culture of choice. Everything from choosing details on new cars, to which flavor mocha java we want, to how we tailor our mortgage to meet our own personal needs. Seemingly unlimited choice drives the engine of our economy. But choice involves more than just selecting goods or services. Choice extends beyond mere consumption to include things like pre-nuptial agreements, serial monogamy, altering our physical appearance, and even our genetic heritage. There seems to be no limit to choice.

When we have so many choices, it is easy to think there is always a positive option. We don't often think about the fact that sometimes our choices trap us. Do we favor the child with amazing athletic potential and sacrifice family resources to develop the talent of the one? Do we slog it out in a dismal job because the benefits are too good to give up? Do we sacrifice a promising career in order to keep our family life stable? Do we stay in a loveless marriage for the sake of the children?

David's is a story of impossible choices. The old saying, "caught between a rock and a hard place" is exactly where we find David in this account of rebellion and tragedy.

Absalom is the third of David's many sons. With eight wives, David hardly could have been expected to keep track of all his children! David's family life is a mess. No surprise, Absalom becomes alienated

from his father. Absalom mounts a rebellion and goes to war in an effort to overthrow David and his kingdom.

Frederick Buechner tells the story of Absalom far better than I can. *“Almost from the start (Buechner tells us) Absalom had a number of strikes against him. For one thing, he was much too handsome for his own good, and his special pride was such a magnificent head of hair that once a year when he had it trimmed, the trimmings alone tipped the scales at three and a half pounds.*

For another thing, his father, King David, was always either spoiling him rotten or reading him the riot act. This did not promote stability of character. He murdered his lecherous brother Amnon for fooling around with their sister Tamar. . . All Israel found this kind of derring-do irresistible, of course, and when he eventually led a revolt against his father, a lot of them joined him.”¹

None of us here is royalty. So it is hard to imagine King David's dilemma. The heirs to the throne are dropping like flies. The next-in-line is creating serious trouble for the House of David. Absalom has turned from bonds of loyalty to murderous rebellion. This is not just a personal thing, but a serious threat to the monarchy. Absalom threatens the very lifeblood of Israel.

There is David's kingly dilemma. But we also see the human side of David. David is torn between salvaging his kingdom and saving his son's life. As we have seen him do so many times before, David tries to have his cake and eat it too. He orders his commanders to spare Absalom. This order (we know) is doomed from the start.

Absalom, too, faces impossible choices. He is caught between a rock and a hard place. He is trapped by his desire to seize the throne versus his lingering personal ties to his father. In an ironic twist of fate, Absalom is tripped up by his pride and joy---his hair. He is trapped in a tree, literally hanging between heaven and earth.

The soldier who discovers the tangled up Absalom is confronted with an impossible choice, too. Does he kill Absalom, and thus end the rebellion, or does he obey the king?

Joab, David's commander, has no such conflict about killing Absalom. In fact, Joab chastises the soldier for not doing it. Yet Joab must know that David will be grief-stricken by Absalom's death. It is

¹ Frederick Buechner, Listening to Your Life, Harper, San Francisco, 1992.

ironic that Joab, who followed David's orders to have Uriah killed, disobeys David's direct order to spare Absalom.

The Dead Poet's Society is a movie that also tells of impossible choices. In the film, Robin Williams plays English teacher John Keating. In contrast to much of Robin Williams' work, this movie was not a comedy. Keating's unorthodox teaching methods stir up the boys at a straight-laced boarding school in the 1950's.

In an age of crew cuts and conformity, Keating urges his students to live life to the fullest, to let loose of their conventions. He exhorts them to *carpe diem*, to "seize the day". But Keating's passionate inspiration comes with an unforeseeable price.

Student Neil Perry is caught between his father's plans for him to attend medical school and his own dream to become an actor. He is unable to tell his parents what he really wants to do. Behind his father's back, Neil wins a leading part in the school play.

When he discovers Neil's deception, his father demands that Neil withdraw from the play, pressing Neil into an impossible choice. A tragic suicide occurs. A father grieves, filled with insurmountable regret, too much, too late. What he would do to undo all of this, what he would give!

"Oh, my son, my son!" Neil's father grieves. "Oh, my son, my son!" David laments.

David grieves for Absalom. David grieves for his son, his sin, his part in Absalom's death. David grieves for the things he has done and for the things he has left undone. David sees with 20-20 clarity. David grieves for the past, and for the future. It nearly undoes him, this grief. Absalom's death pierces him to the heart.

If David could have died for Absalom, he would have. If he could have paid the price for the boy's betrayal, he would have. If he could have given his own life to make the boy alive again, he would have. But even a king can't do things like that. Even kings and conquerors cannot undo the past. Even princes and politicians cannot rescue us from the consequences of our choices. People cannot do such things. It takes God.

It takes God to come to us when we are caught between a rock and a hard place. It takes God to rescue us when we are left hanging between heaven and earth. It takes God to comfort us when we are beyond grief. It takes God. Nothing more, nothing less.

Each one of us will choose wrongly. Each one of us will be unable to foresee the consequences of our prideful actions, the fallout from our wrong-headed decisions. We will not be able to undo these things, and we will grieve. God willing, our grief will not be that of a parent for a child, but if we live long enough, there will be something. There will be someone. Sometime. Sooner or later, it's bound to be. Sooner or later, we all get tangled up in our pride, in our passion, yes even, in our good intentions.

We are fortunate that when this happens, we may grieve, but we need not despair. Because we have God. God who has walked in our grief, and who promises us hope beyond a life of impossible choices. We have God.

God will not leave us when the choices we make reduce us to bitter tears. God will stand with us when we are pierced to the heart. When we have all but given up hope, we have God.

Somehow, even in this tragic story of David and his grief, God redeems. Out of the shambles of David's family, out of the sin of David's loins, there will grow a branch which will engender a Son who will be destined to change the entire course of history. A Son who will be the pride and joy of his Father. A Son who will be mocked and scourged, humiliated and executed. A Son whose father will grieve beyond words. An impossible choice destined to become an incredible promise. You know his name. The Son of David, the Son of God.