

The Way Home

The Scripture verse that I appears as our Pre-Worship thought in today's bulletin, spoke to me during my morning devotions several weeks ago. And, it's been sort of like a fish swimming just beneath the surface of a pond that comes up from time to time to take food from the surface of the water. This Scripture has been stirring just beneath my consciousness and comes to the surface every now and then, inviting me to feed on it more deeply.

The key thought in this verse is that God will find a way to restore fellowship to those who have cut themselves off from Him. II Samuel 14:14 in the Contemporary English Version of the New Testament reads like this, "We each must die and disappear like water poured out on the ground. But God doesn't take our lives. Instead, he figures out ways of bringing us back when we run away."

In its original context this verse is part of a parable given to King David when his son Absalom was estranged from him. It's a part of a long sad story. We have been hearing much on the news recently about a Fundamentalist Mormon Sect down in Texas, whose children were taken into custody by the state under one court order and then returned under another. The problem is polygamy and the arranged marriages of under-aged brides to older men. It's a very messy situation, for although polygamy is illegal in this country, it is still practiced and polygamous families do exist. And, the legal and ethical question is, once those families have been established, and children are being raised, what--if anything--should be done about it? If it cannot be proven that the children are being abused, should the state remove them from the only father and mothers they have ever known? Is it legal and ethical to separate them from their brothers and sisters? And what about the so-called single mother families, in which there is no marriage, but many children to different fathers. This is perfectly legal, though arguably worse for the children. It's a sticky wicket to be sure.

But polygamy or polyandry have always been problematic and such marriages have been outlawed in our nation for good reason. Though not illegal in King David's day, his practice of polygamy led to tragic consequences. David's son Amnon was his first-born; his mother was Ahinoam of Jezreel. Absalom was David's third son, born to his third wife Maacah, daughter of

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Talmi king of Geshur. Absalom's full sister was Tamar. David had eight wives in all, plus an unspecified number of concubines; we may be sure that this palace was playground for many children.

The problem we read about in our Scripture lesson for this morning began when Amnon raped his half-sister Tamar, who was full sister to his half-brother Absalom. Absalom hated Amnon for what he had done to his sister, and eventually arranged to have him killed. It was pre-meditated murder, but we can understand Absalom's motive.

After Absalom killed Amnon, he knew he couldn't just go home again, so he fled and found shelter among his mother's family in Geshur. He was there a long time, and eventually King David came to mourn Absalom's absence more than the death of his son Amnon. Though Amnon had been his first-born, David had a special love for Absalom, and he longed to have him home. But David could also be a proud and stubborn man, and so although he mourned for Absalom, he took no action to bridge the gap between them. David's suffering, however, was clear to all who knew him.

That's where our Scripture lesson for today begins. II Samuel 14:1 says, "Now Joab son of Zeruiah perceived that the king's mind was on Absalom." Joab was David's friend and head general in David's army. They had fought many battles together, and Joab loved David and couldn't stand to see him depressed over Absalom. So, Joab, general that he was, and knowing David as he did,

designed a plan to bring Absalom home. II Samuel 14:2-3 say, "Joab sent to Tekoa and brought from there a wise woman. He said to her, 'Pretend to be a mourner; put on mourning garments, do not anoint yourself with oil, but behave like a woman who has been mourning many days for the dead. Go to the king and speak to him as follows.' And Joab put the words into her mouth."

What Joab was looking for here was a good actress and someone smart and wise enough to understand and agree with his plan. This woman from Tekoa learned her script and played her role well. II Samuel 14:4-11 give us her performance: "When the woman of Tekoa came to the king, she fell on her face to the ground and did obeisance, and said, 'Help, O king!'

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The king asked her, 'What is your trouble?' She answered, 'Alas, I am a widow; my husband is dead. Your servant had two sons, and they fought with one another in the field; there was no one to part them, and one struck the other and killed him. Now the whole family has risen against your servant. They say, "Give up the man who struck his brother, so that we may kill him for the life of his brother whom he murdered, even if we destroy the heir as well." Thus they would quench my one remaining ember, and leave to my husband neither name nor remnant on the face of the earth.' Then the king said to the woman, 'Go to your house, and I will give orders concerning you.' The woman of Tekoa said to the king, 'On me be the guilt, my lord the king, and on my father's house; let the king and his throne be guiltless.' The king said, 'If anyone says anything to you, bring him to me, and he shall never touch you again.' Then she said, 'Please, may the king keep the LORD your God in mind, so that the avenger of blood may kill no more, and my son not be destroyed.' He said, 'As the LORD lives, not one hair of your son shall fall to the ground.'"

The situation the woman describes is tragic. Boys will be boys and sometimes they fight and once in a while things get out of hand and someone dies. In this case there were no witnesses to report how things went down. The mother is the greater victim here. She has already lost one son and those around her are demanding the life of her other son as well. She appeals to the king for mercy. The story is carefully crafted. It has to be close enough to what happened between Amnon and Absalom, but not so close as to be transparent. If the king sees through the story too soon, it will lose its effect. He must become emotionally involved with the story before he understands it is his own story. David takes the bait and promises that he will take measures to preserve the life of her remaining son.

Then it was time to make application: II Samuel 14:12-13 say, "Then the woman said, 'Please let your servant speak a word to my lord the king.' He said, 'Speak.' The woman said, 'Why then have you planned such a thing against the people of God? For in giving this decision the king convicts himself, inasmuch as the king does not bring his banished one home again.'" The leadership principle involved here is consistency. If the king wants his people to be merciful, he himself must model mercy. The woman's performance has been flawless and Joab's script effective, David gets the point of the parable. He brings

Absalom back to Jerusalem. There is more to the story and David should have done more than he did, nevertheless, he made the right beginning.

And, this leads us back to our key verse, the woman said, "We must all die; we are like water spilled on the ground, which cannot be gathered up. But God will not take away a life; he will devise plans so as not to keep an outcast banished forever from his presence." What we have here is one story stacked up on another. The first story is fictional. The woman didn't have two sons who fought, the one killing the other, this was just a made up story. But the second story really happened. King David's son did kill his brother, and David needed to make a decision regarding the guilty one. If the murder had been committed out of jealousy, greed, or a quest for power, the verdict would have been clear--an eye for an eye a tooth for a tooth. Absalom would have been sentenced to death. But, because the murder was committed in revenge for his sister's rape, Absalom did not deserve to die. However premeditated, it was still a crime of passion. There was also precedence for this in Hebrew history. The son's of Jacob slew all the men in the city of Shechem because Shechem's prince, Shechem, had raped their sister Dinah. Jacob didn't approve their act of revenge, especially because they went overboard, but neither did he punish his sons for what they did. Thus with these stories, David was being counseled to find a way to write a good ending to his story, to find a way back for Absalom. It was time for the wall between them to be demolished.

But the story of David and Absalom and the fictional story about the two sons of the woman from Tekoa, and the true story about Jacob and his sons in Shechem, are all subserviant to a greater story, and the greater story is the story of God's dealings with His people throughout history. "God will not take a life; He will devise plans so as not to keep an outcast banished forever from His presence." The greater story--the greatest story ever told--is about a God who absorbs the punishment for the sins of His people and makes away for the undeserving outcasts to come home. It's the story of God making animal skin clothing for Adam and Eve when they lost their innocence in the garden of Eden. It's the story of Joseph forgiving and feeding his brothers who sold him into slavery in Egypt. It's the story of the prodigal Son. It's the story of Peter who denied his Lord, only to be forgiven and brought fully back into the fold. It's the story of the thief finding grace from the savior dying next to him on a cross

as painful as his own. It's the story Peter preached on the Day of Pentecost to some of the very people who had helped crucify Jesus; that if they would change their minds about what they had done, and be baptized as believers, even they would be saved.

Why does God give us a book filled with stories of people we've never known nor met? Why does God tell us this story about David and Absalom? I would suggest to you that the reason God gives us this book full of stories because He knows that if we read these stories or hear these stories and if we become emotionally involved with the characters in the stories, sooner or later we will discover that their story parallels our own story. The Bible is written that we might see ourselves in these pages.

Hebrews 4:12 says, "Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart."

What do you think of when you hear the story of David and Absalom? Is there any situation in your own life that is brought to mind? Is there forgiveness that needs to be pursued, someone banished from your home who needs to be invited back? Or may it be that you are the one who has been banished; you know you have done wrong and do not deserve to be forgiven, but here in these stories you see God's grace reaching, longing, yearning for you. You see Jesus dying on the cross for you. God has devised a plan so that you will not need to be an outcast anymore.

Maybe you are hearing this news for the first time: God has devised a plan for you. Maybe you have sinned and are doubting God's willingness to forgive: God has devised a plan for you. Maybe you know someone else who is acting like an outcast, one banished from the Christian family: God has devised a plan for him and for her. God has devised a plan "so as not to keep an outcast banished forever from his presence." God has devised a plan for you, for me, and for them, whoever they may be. The plan is this, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." **Have you accepted Jesus Christ as your Savior? Have you accepted His forgiveness for your sins? Have you extended that forgiveness to others. God has made a way.**

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Sermon for June 8, 2008

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II Samuel 14:1-14

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