

**A Sermon for 12th Sunday after Pentecost**

**August 11, 2024**



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**New Life Episcopal Church, Uniontown, OH**

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**[Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost – The Episcopal Church](#)**

2 Samuel 18:5-9, 15, 31-33, Psalm 130

## Absalom My Son

Today we will consider the life, character, and misfortunes of King David, who lived in 1000 BC. First, the good things: while quite young, he fought and defeated the Philistine giant Goliath. He was chosen as the next king of Israel by God and anointed by Samuel, also when he was quite young. He married King Saul's daughter, Michal, who didn't like him, and I guess the feeling was mutual. He moved the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem. He won many battles. He considered building a big temple to house the Ark of the Covenant, but was persuaded that it wasn't his job, because he was a military leader. He united the Northern Kingdom and the Southern Kingdom of the Jews and was the first king of this united kingdom. He was best friends with Jonathan, the son of King Saul, and grieved mightily over Jonathan's death. He comforted King Saul when Saul was having mental problems, by singing to Saul and playing his lyre. He wrote some beautiful psalms, many expressing his deep feelings about the events of his life. He didn't write all 150 psalms, but he probably did write some of them, and we read one of the most famous, Psalm 130, this morning.

In the past two weeks, we heard about his adulterous affair with Bathsheba, wife of Uriah, how David arranged to have Uriah killed in battle, and how the prophet Nathan blessed him out for this huge sin. David assumed that God was punishing him through the death of David and Bathsheba's first child together, and David lamented long and hard about that. David is especially eloquent in lamenting and repenting.

David's life had lots of ups and downs, and as such, his life can be seen as a model for all of us in how we deal with joy and adversity. He was very fond of his children, and one of his greatest losses was his son Absalom. We can see Absalom as a rebellious teenager, only a little worse, because he organized an armed revolt against his father. David was ever forgiving and did not want his son harmed. Please! Don't kill Absalom! he pleaded with his military officers. However, Absalom did die, in a rather shameful fashion. Absalom had long luxurious hair, and when he rode his mule under a tree branch, his hair became entangled and Absalom was lifted off

his mule and left hanging by his hair, in the air. (The Bible text actually says that Absalom was caught under his jaw by the tree branch, but tradition has embellished the tale to make this story “death by hair.”) At any rate, hanging there, Absalom was an easy target and was killed. When David heard the news, he was totally bereft. He could easily have written Psalm 130 in response. This great psalm of lament is often read at funerals, in expressing inconsolable loss.

David may have been wondering if he was still being punished for his adultery with Bathsheba, but I think that is doubtful. God doesn't work that way. David was just experiencing one of the most wrenching losses a parent can suffer, the death of his child. David cried, “O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son.”

Why did Absalom die? There is a theological concept called theodicy, which pretty much absolves God of causing human misery. God didn't kill Absalom. And God didn't punish David with Absalom's death. David may have wanted to die in Absalom's place – this is known as bargaining with God – but that didn't happen either. Often for the events of our lives there is no explanation. It is not our fault, it is not God's punishment, it just happens. Of course we will grieve mightily, but in the end we can't change the outcome. The only change can take place in ourselves, as we come slowly to acceptance.

Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, the Swiss American psychiatrist, wrote in her book “On Death and Dying” in 1969 that we go through stages of grief, stages like denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance, and those stages can all happen at once or in sequence, but eventually, with time, one comes to accept the death of a loved one.

So what good is God in these circumstances? God can't, or won't, change it. This grief is going to happen anyway. What good is God? What good are our prayers?

First of all, God is a great comfort and companion. God is right there, in our grief. God understands loss, especially the loss of a child. Some

people imagine God carrying them in their grief, leaving one set of Godly footprints on the seashore.

And what about our prayers? Are prayers effective? Especially if you prayed for recovery and your loved one died anyway?

Our prayers are indeed effective. The prayers quiet us, center us, and help us focus on the sufferer. The prayers help us to be part of a community of prayer, holding the sufferer in our hearts. We pray for comfort for the sufferer, we pray for healing, whatever form healing shall take. It might mean death. We don't get to choose. We must leave it up to God, but we can certainly petition God on behalf of others. I do believe that sometimes God changes God's mind and there can be a joyful recovery of life and health. I do believe that God gathers all the prayers together for the comfort of the afflicted and those who care for them.

It's hard, isn't it. We want miracles but they are rare in human experience. What we get instead is the love of God, the love of community, and the knowledge that in the end, "all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well."

\*Julian of Norwich