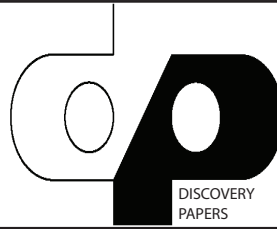


MURDER AND MAYHEM

**SERIES: A LIFE OF PASSION:
THE STORY OF DAVID.**



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2 Samuel 13:23–14:33
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2 Samuel 13:23–14:33

It didn't make any sense to me. I was in junior high school at the time. People were starting to talk about whom they were going to invite to the junior high dance. I can still remember so vividly the conversation that I had with my friend. We were in the bathroom washing our hands at the sink.

He asked me if there was anyone that I wanted to invite. I answered with the name of one of the most beautiful girls in our class. In the intricate social layers of middle school, she was definitely far out of my league. My friend said the most ridiculous thing I'd ever heard, "You should ask her." I couldn't imagine asking her. It would be a disaster.

But he had given me a tiny spark of hope, so I asked, "Do you think she would say yes?" He replied, "Of course not. But you should ask her anyway." This made no sense to me. Why would I put myself out there with such little chance of success? It was a stupid suggestion.

We've taken the last few weeks off from our current series to celebrate the most important holiday of the Christian calendar: Easter. It was a great week of events here at PBC. But Easter continues. The early church considered every Sunday a "little Easter." That's why the resurrection of Christ is the message that infuses everything we do.

And so as we continue in the Easter season, we pick back up in our series on the life of David that we've called *A Life of Passion*. Last August we started working our way through the longest personal narrative in the entire Old Testament that describes the rich and complicated life of the most celebrated king of Israel. We saw David start out as a shepherd, become anointed king, run for his life as a fugitive, and finally be installed as king. Most recently our attention has shifted to David as a father.

It has been a disappointing season in David's life. In the several weeks before Palm Sunday, David's life became an emotional rollercoaster. First we saw him

compel a young woman to sleep with him and then murder her husband to cover up his actions. How could the "man after God's own heart" do these things?

Then we saw a repentance that was as beautiful as his sin was dark. He took responsibility for his action and received forgiveness from God. But in the next scene, we were disappointed again. David's daughter is raped by her half-brother. We are told that David is angry with this, but we don't yet see any active response.

In this event, the nation of Israel suffered a great tragedy. Everyone knew what had happened. There was a crime in the royal court. Can you imagine the tabloid headlines? Everyone is waiting to find out how the king is going to respond. What will the king do? Nothing. Sadly, David does nothing. Because of his passivity, more injustice follows. What began with rape now turns into murder and mayhem.

This becomes the pattern for David's life moving forward. David becomes passive. He fails to act when he ought to step forward. He becomes easily manipulated by the agendas of the people around him. He shrinks away from his responsibility. In the last several weeks, we were challenged by David's abuse of power. His sins were those of action. But now we'll be challenged by his sins of inaction.

David's inaction is an important behaviour for us to wrestle with. A lot of us are like I was in junior high school. We face a complicated, complex situation with uncertain consequences and we can't imagine doing anything. We disengage. We pull back. We're fine when we understand what's going on. We can work hard when we feel competent and in control. But when things are confusing or the outcome is unclear, we get passive too.

In our story this morning, we'll see David's passivity play out in three different cycles. In each of these cycles, someone will manipulate him into action. David will respond instead of initiating. In each case, his passivity will render him unable to fulfill one of his responsibilities. And the overall situation will continue to get worse as he continually fails to act.

What are the consequences of our passivity? How do we avoid falling into this kind of a trap? How does God help us when we feel stuck or confused or paralyzed?

David's example this morning will be a warning for us. But it can also help us to learn how to act. In the end, we'll see how the resurrection of the son of David that we celebrated last week can help us along the way.

Too Passive to Bring Justice

The story begins two years after the rape of Tamar. That's a very long time for nothing to have happened after the rape of the king's daughter. It's a huge void. But when those who ought to act do not, other people step in to fill the void. That's what happens here.

2 Samuel 13:23-27:

After two full years Absalom had sheepshearers at Baal-hazor, which is near Ephraim, and Absalom invited all the king's sons. 24 And Absalom came to the king and said, "Behold, your servant has sheepshearers. Please let the king and his servants go with your servant." 25 But the king said to Absalom, "No, my son, let us not all go, lest we be burdensome to you." He pressed him, but he would not go but gave him his blessing. 26 Then Absalom said, "If not, please let my brother Amnon go with us." And the king said to him, "Why should he go with you?" 27 But Absalom pressed him until he let Amnon and all the king's sons go with him.

The story begins with Absalom, not with David. With some clever scheming, Absalom finally succeeds in getting Amnon, the perpetrator of Tamar's rape, to come to a party that he is throwing. But Amnon doesn't come alone. We are told that "all the king's sons" go with him. In fact, this phrase is repeated six times in rapid succession.

For an ancient near-Eastern king, one of their primary fears was that they would have no heir. David had already been promised that his house would rule over Israel for a long time. But he seems to feel a little similar to how Abraham felt: uncertain of whether God was really going to fulfill that promise. I think David was scared that his mistakes would cause God to go back on that promise.

That's exactly the fear that Absalom plays on. He instructs his servants to murder Amnon, which they do. But he also arranges for word to be brought back to the

king that Absalom killed all of his sons. The report is made with the ominous emphasis, "not one of them is left."

This is the worst possible scenario. David is overcome with grief upon hearing this news. But then a familiar character returns to our story to lessen the blow of what has just happened.

2 Samuel 13:32-33:

But Jonadab the son of Shimeah, David's brother, said, "Let not my lord suppose that they have killed all the young men, the king's sons, for Amnon alone is dead. For by the command of Absalom this has been determined from the day he violated his sister Tamar. 33 Now therefore let not my lord the king so take it to heart as to suppose that all the king's sons are dead, for Amnon alone is dead."

Do you remember Jonadab? He was the crafty friend who helped Amnon find a way to get his sister Tamar alone in a room so that he (Jonadab) could rape her. Now Jonadab has apparently switched his allegiance to help Absalom with the murder of Amnon. He helped Amnon get into this situation and now he's helping Absalom get even.

Jonadab's strategy here is a familiar one. You may have tried this same kind of approach in high school. "Dad, I crashed the car... well, actually I just scratched it on the side." If you thought you were clever, now you know that this strategy has been around for at least three thousand years.

So David finds out what has happened. This vengeance has been brewing for two years, but it is finally expressed. Amnon has been killed. A royal murder has been committed. What happens next?

2 Samuel 13:37-39:

But Absalom fled and went to Talmai the son of Ammihud, king of Geshur. And David mourned for his son day after day. 38 So Absalom fled and went to Geshur, and was there three years. 39 And the spirit of the king longed to go out to Absalom, because he was comforted about Amnon, since he was dead.

You might remember that Absalom's mother was the daughter of a foreign king. David married her through a political arrangement. So now, in the middle of his crisis, Absalom runs away to his grandfather to hide out in his kingdom.

And what does David do? Verse 39 is notoriously difficult to translate because the Hebrew doesn't completely make sense. But what it is mostly likely saying is that David was conflicted. He grieved for the death of Amnon because he was his first-born son. At the same time, he feels relieved that the rape of his daughter has received some justice. But he's also frustrated that it came at the hands of Absalom, another son whom he loves. He wants to reach out but once again, he doesn't know what to do.

Here we can be somewhat sympathetic to David. This was a really confusing situation. The right thing to do isn't abundantly clear. How does he fulfill his responsibility to bring justice while honoring his love for his children?

It's a confusing situation, but it requires some kind of action. Finding justice is tricky, but by doing nothing, David leaves that event hanging in the national conscience. It's like a song that ends one note too early. You're waiting for something to resolve. But justice doesn't come. David does nothing.

We face similar situations in our lives. We are aware of conflict or some wrong done against another person and we don't know what to do. We see our loved ones making dangerous choices. Or we observe it in the culture around us. How do we get involved?

David was too passive to bring justice. Is that ever true of you? Are you too passive to bring justice?

Edmund Burke was an 18th century British politician. He famously said, "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing."¹

This is true on an international scale, but it is also true in our daily lives. Parents face this challenge every day. How do we discipline our children when they make poor choices, but assure them at every turn that we love them unconditionally? We can't afford to be passive. And we don't usually face one big complicated choice like David. We face dozens of little slightly confusing choices every single day.

We might face this kind of temptation to be passive in our workplaces as well. What happens when you experience sexual harassment at work? What happens when you witness it against someone else? Do you report it? Would there be repercussions? It's a no-win situation. You could lose your job; you could anger your boss; you could make things worse.

But you can't stay silent and not do anything. This is what makes injustice possible. This is what allows injustice to thrive. People are too passive to do anything about it because the situation is just too complex.

Is there an area in your life where you need to act for the sake of justice? To speak up about what is right and good? Are you too afraid or confused? David was. Because David couldn't deal with the injustice before him, it grew. Murder followed rape.

David's sons have now followed his example. David sexually assaulted a woman and then murdered her husband. Now, one son has raped. Another son has murdered. The sins of the father have been passed down.

Too Passive to Extend Mercy

Once again, David does nothing. Absalom has fled the country. He has gone to a foreign king. Eventually, David's military general, Joab, gets nervous. I think he's probably concerned that Absalom is going to launch a military campaign against Israel, so he wants David to reconcile with his son in order to neutralize that threat.

Joab enlists the help of a "wise woman" and tells her to pretend to come to the king with a problem. Here is how he instructs her and what she says.

2 Samuel 14:3-7:

Go to the king and speak thus to him." So Joab put the words in her mouth.

4 When the woman of Tekoa came to the king, she fell on her face to the ground and paid homage and said, "Save me, O king." 5 And the king said to her, "What is your trouble?" She answered, "Alas, I am a widow; my husband is dead. 6 And your servant had two sons, and they quarreled with one another in the field. There was no one to separate them, and one struck the other and killed him. 7 And now the whole clan has risen against your servant, and they say, 'Give up the man who struck his brother, that we may put him to death for the life of his brother whom he killed.' And so they would destroy the heir also. Thus they would quench my coal that is left and leave to my husband neither name nor remnant on the face of the earth."

After David had sinned with Bathsheba, the prophet Nathan confronted him with his sin by telling a parable. Once again, David has sinned. And once again, someone close to him arranges for a story to be told to highlight his mistake. This scene is parallel to Nathan's confrontation, but the differences reveal the significance.

In the first scene, Nathan was a prophet sent by YHWH. In this scene, we have a wise woman sent by Joab. We trust YHWH and Nathan. So far, what we know of Joab is that he is a murderer and he is committed to political expediency over every other possible value.

There was little exaggeration in Nathan's story. David had done exactly what the rich man in the story had done. But this woman's story is full of exaggerations and situations that don't fit well with what had happened.

The result is that Nathan's parable invoked a sense of justice. Power had been abused and David was moved to address the wrong. The wise woman's story invokes fear. In fact, it's the same fear that Jonadab managed to play against. This woman is worried that the mob will "destroy the heir." David is worried that "all his sons" might really be killed. He is terrified that he has ruined his legacy.

David is struck to the heart after Nathan's parable. David had this beautiful, full repentance. That doesn't happen here. David and the wise woman have a kind of back-and-forth in which she finally manages to get what she wants out of him. But only after David figures out who is behind all this.

2 Samuel 14:19-21:

The king said, "Is the hand of Joab with you in all this?" The woman answered and said, "As surely as you live, my lord the king, one cannot turn to the right hand or to the left from anything that my lord the king has said. It was your servant Joab who commanded me; it was he who put all these words in the mouth of your servant. 20 In order to change the course of things your servant Joab did this. But my lord has wisdom like the wisdom of the angel of God to know all things that are on the earth."

21 Then the king said to Joab, "Behold now, I grant this; go, bring back the young man Absalom."

In one sense, we are relieved that David is finally doing something. At least he has been moved to action. But it isn't the kind of action that we want. David hasn't come to a conclusion and decided to step forward in

courage. Joab has been successful in "changing the course of things." David has been manipulated.

That becomes perfectly clear once Absalom returns.

2 Samuel 14:24:

And the king said, "Let him dwell apart in his own house; he is not to come into my presence." So Absalom lived apart in his own house and did not come into the king's presence.

David has been manipulated by Joab to allow Absalom to return, but now he doesn't know what to do. It isn't a full kind of acceptance. Absalom is back in the city, but he doesn't get to see David. And once again, justice is incomplete. This man, Absalom, has killed a prince of the kingdom. He has murdered him in cold blood during a spectacular party. The king has invited Absalom back into the city, but ostracized him in his home.

The other day I woke up angry with my wife. I wasn't exactly sure why until I realized that she had been really mean to me in my dream. Realizing that it had only been a dream didn't take away my anger though. I told her, "I'm sorry, but I'm angry at you for something you did in my dream. I know it wasn't real, but I'm mad nonetheless."

This is similar to what David does to Absalom. David brings Absalom back and there are unresolved issues, but David just leaves them. He's not going to resolve them. Absalom can't fix them. David won't address them.

David is stuck. Both of his sons have committed violent crimes. One is now dead, the other estranged. How can he reconcile with Absalom without dishonoring his first-born? In the first scene, David's passivity meant he failed to bring justice. Here his passivity means that he can't extend mercy. He's stuck with unresolved anger and he refuses to deal with it.

Does that ever happen to you? You're upset. You're angry. Maybe you have resentment. It's complicated to explain exactly how you feel. You know you should do something. But you can't figure out what to do. Do you get stuck there? Are you too passive to extend mercy?

None of us likes to be angry. We don't want to feel resentment toward people. We don't know what to do with our anger. Should I talk to them? Should I just try to get over it on my own? Do I have a right to be angry? Am I in the wrong or are they?

That's the tricky thing about emotions. You can't always figure them out. You can't always be sure whether you or the other person is in the right. But a relationship is not about being right or wrong. It's about learning to love. To love, sometimes you have to take a step without knowing where it will lead.

You can't just stay in your confusion. You can't get stuck and mired by your conflicting emotions and allow them to freeze you in place. You can't withdraw and hope the problem will go away.

I know children who have felt the cold judgment of their parents for years, even decades, even after their parents have passed away. Sometimes inaction can be the clearest and most painful act of withholding mercy.

David is so stuck that he can't bring justice or extend mercy. This is what passivity looks like. You fall off both sides of the cliff at the same time.

Stuck

Remember that when the person who ought to act does not, someone usually steps in to fill the void. That happens in our final scene. After years of living in limbo, Absalom gets tired of his situation. He steps in to force David's hand.

2 Samuel 14:30-33:

Then he said to his servants, "See, Joab's field is next to mine, and he has barley there; go and set it on fire." So Absalom's servants set the field on fire. 31 Then Joab arose and went to Absalom at his house and said to him, "Why have your servants set my field on fire?" 32 Absalom answered Joab, "Behold, I sent word to you, 'Come here, that I may send you to the king, to ask, "Why have I come from Geshur? It would be better for me to be there still." Now therefore let me go into the presence of the king, and if there is guilt in me, let him put me to death.'" 33 Then Joab went to the king and told him, and he summoned Absalom. So he came to the king and bowed himself on his face to the ground before the king, and the king kissed Absalom.

You have to appreciate Absalom's wit. He's clever. Okay, you won't talk to me. Then I'll burn down your field. Now you'll have to talk to me. It might remind us of Samson who also burned down some fields in vengeance. Samson's lack of self-control was his downfall. This could be a clue that Absalom's fate will be similar.

At any rate, his strategy works in this scene. Absalom has forced his way into a conversation with Joab. And Joab convinced David to finally see his son.

The chapter has been building toward a face-to-face encounter between Absalom and David. All the various manipulations were an effort to get this to happen. But when we finally arrive at this point, it is a letdown. Remember that in Hebrew stories, the dialogue carries the most meaning. But we're not told of any words between Absalom and David.

Absalom bows and "the king"—he's not even called by name—kisses Absalom. It's as if the king were welcoming a foreign visitor or guest of the court. This is not a long anticipated reunion between a father and son who haven't seen each other for five years.

David still doesn't know what to do. He couldn't bring justice to his son Amnon. He couldn't extend mercy to Absalom. And now he can't bring himself to reconcile with Absalom. Here is his son, standing in front of him. And David is still completely unable to do anything. David receives him as an acquaintance. And the distance that separated them when Absalom was in Geshur or isolated in his house is somehow made worse, rather than better, by this meeting.

Situations confuse us all. We all face things that we don't know what to do about. And sometimes we allow ourselves to stay in that place. Rust builds up. The grass grows around our feet. We stand still for so long that we don't know how to start walking again. At this point in the story, David seems completely stuck. All the characters around him are controlling, scheming, and manipulating. And he can't act. He's stuck.

Do you feel like that? Is there an area in your life in which you are just stuck? Are you stuck?

Let's think about what makes David so stuck. I think the biggest contributing factor is fear. He's simply afraid. He's made a huge mistake with Bathsheba and Uriah. David is afraid of doing something foolish again. He's afraid that his lineage will be ruined. In a word, he's afraid of failing.

Think about Peter for a moment. He had more failures than almost anyone in the Bible. He lacked faith when he walked on water. He said inane things about building tents when Jesus was transfigured. He even said something so dim that Jesus referred to him as Satan. And then, in Jesus' last moments, Peter completely turned his back. "I don't know the man."

And then comes Easter. The Messiah who has died has risen back to life. With Jesus, failure is never the end of the story. Death gives way to life. Failure gives way to redemption. A mistake opens the door for God to work.

After the resurrection, Jesus finds Peter and he restores him. Three times he speaks to him to offset each of Peter's denial. Peter is restored and redeemed. He becomes bold and courageous. He keeps making mistakes, but he also becomes a central part of the movement of the Gospel in the ancient world.

Honestly, I think this is what has motivated us to get involved in efforts like Beautiful Day. When we think about all the cultural challenges that faith in Christ comes up against in our area, it is overwhelming. If the Bay Area is the least-churched area in the country, then our little section of the Peninsula must be even worse. Church in Palo Alto has become almost completely irrelevant. We are tolerated as relics of a bygone past.

It's not clear what we can do. Ultimately our hope lies with Christ, not with the cleverest strategy. But we have to do something. We have to step out and demonstrate the love of Christ to our community. We have to be present in our cities. We have to make it known that we want to be agents of healing and hope, not of anger and judgment.

That's why in three weeks, we'll suspend worship services here and move our worship into our local communities. We will have literally hundreds of opportunities to step out in faith and do something, no matter how small, for the sake of the kingdom of God.

We trust that God is leading us. We trust that God will use our efforts. And most importantly, we trust that if we make mistakes, God can redeem them.

What is it for you? Where are you stuck? Perhaps you need to be restored from past mistakes like Peter? Perhaps you need to be encouraged to engage in a complicated and confusing situation. Or perhaps you need to re-evaluate some priorities. Maybe your problem is not that you're passive, but that you're using all your energies in the wrong area, leaving nothing left for those areas of your life that are harder to engage in.

Whatever your reason, the only way to recover from perfectionism is through Christ. We can fail with freedom only because God is sovereign. Our failures won't sink the ship. God is good. Christ is at work. The Spirit is moving in the world.

Conclusion

I do wish that I had asked that girl in junior high to the dance. I don't think she would have said yes. I'm quite sure she would have turned me down. But I think my friend was right. That little act might have helped me get a head start in fighting the passivity of perfectionism that I've known for so long.

But God is good. He's been teaching me in other ways. I'm learning to act. I'm learning to initiate with my wife, with my children, with the people around me. I'm learning to figure out what is happening when I'm stuck. And I'm learning to trust God to help me take that first step.

In our story this morning, we've seen David get stuck. His actions are the result of someone's manipulation of him. In the weeks that follow, we'll see David's passivity lead to Absalom's revolt and the throwing of the nation of Israel into complete confusion. The reverberations of his sin with Bathsheba and Uriah continue to tear apart his family and his nation.

Consider how different the son of David is. In his final weeks, Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem. He entered the city and preached about a new kind of kingdom. And even when it seemed as if other people controlled his fate, it was clear that this was a path he had chosen. He was arrested, humiliated, and put to death. But he was not passive. Jesus chose his path.

He can help us to choose as well.

Don't let failure paralyze you. Be free and courageous. Follow Christ where he's leading you.

Endnotes

¹“Edmund Burke.” BrainyQuote.com. Xplore Inc, 2016. 4 April 2016. <<http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/e/edmundburk377528.html>>