

Where's my happy ending

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

Anyone who knows me well enough, knows that I am an affirmed chocoholic. I come by this naturally. My dad's favorite dessert was devil's food cake, iced with homemade Hershey's chocolate frosting, topped with ice cream and chocolate syrup - which I ate a lot of while growing up. So, it's not surprising to find that the little candy dishes on my desks at work (two offices, one dish in each office) are filled with chocolates. Often the chocolates are the Dove variety, which are wrapped in foil with cute little sayings printed inside. Recently I opened one of these treats to read "Everyone gets a happy ending. If you're not happy, it's not the end." Then I read this week's lectionary verses.

King David had it all didn't he? Anointed as the future king of Israel as a youth, war hero with the adoration of the nation, harem of beautiful wives and a growing family. He should have been sitting on top of the world – but he wasn't. In today's Scripture reading David is reaping the outcome of poor decisions made regarding his adult children and his nation. Here's a quick recap of what brought David to this point in his life.

Amnon, David's first son and heir to the throne, was infatuated with his half-sister, Tamar. Feigning illness, he asked David to have Tamar

bring him some food. When she complied with her half-brother's request, he raped her. Rather than preserving her honor and marrying her, Amnon rejected Tamar. Absalom, Tamar's full brother, took her in and harbored anger against his brother. Two years later, having given David enough time to act on Amnon's bad behavior, Absalom took matters into his own hands and hosted a sheep shearing festival and asked David to send all his brothers. When everyone was gathered for the feast, Absalom gave orders to have Amnon killed, in order to defend his sister's honor. Following the murder of Amnon, Absalom fled to Geshur, his mother's country of origin. After several years of grieving the loss of both of his sons, David is convinced by his general, Joab, to bring Absalom back to Jerusalem. Joab believed that a grieving king posed a threat to national security. David, however, refused to see Absalom while he lived in Jerusalem. Once in Jerusalem, Absalom amassed a small army and plotted a rebellion against his father, the king. As Chapter 18 of 2 Samuel opens, we find David and his army preparing to face the army of Absalom. David is rallying his men and offering his support as well as his presence. However, his generals prevail upon him to sit out this battle, saying since he will be the target of Absalom's army it would be best for him to stay at home.

Do you remember what happened the last time David stayed home from battle? That didn't end well either. For those who don't remember, David spied the beautiful Bathsheba bathing on her rooftop and had her

brought to the palace. Their brief affair resulted in a pregnancy, which David tried to cover by recalling Bathsheba's husband from the war. When Uriah, Bathsheba's husband, refused to go home to his wife out of allegiance to his comrades in the army, David had him placed at the front of the battle where he was sure to be killed. Not only does this sordid story result in the death of Uriah, but also, as God's punishment for David's sin, the death of the child born to David and Bathsheba. Perhaps we should not be surprised, then, that today's story also ends unhappily.

Having complied with his generals and opting to stay home, David asks that his men deal gently with his rebellious son. His general, Joab, had different ideas of how to end the family dysfunction and restore harmony to the nation. When Absalom was found in a very vulnerable position, dangling from an oak tree by his hair, Joab ordered him killed. Where was David's happy ending?

When you hear stories like this, do you find yourself wondering what were these people thinking?! What prompts them to respond to the situations they are in in the way that they do? How could David not have taken action when Amnon abused his sister? How could David even consider bringing Absalom back to Jerusalem after he murdered his brother? How does a king decide that the person fomenting rebellion within his own household should be spared? All tough questions. How would you respond?

And there's the rub. We don't know how we would respond. While none of us need worry about an aggrieved child trying to wrest a kingdom from us, we have had to make some tough choices in our lives. Children going down the wrong path may need to have tough love practiced on them. And don't be fooled, it's not just tough on the child. There may be family, friends, or business associates who have treated us unfairly and we have struggled to decide the "right" course of action in response. Maybe we were the ones who did something we have come to regret only after experiencing the fallout of our actions. Perhaps there is grief that feels like it will not end. A happy ending eludes us.

Jesus tells us that, we will know the truth and the truth will set us free. That's even when the truth is terribly uncomfortable. David's truth was that the violent actions of his children, which were not properly dealt with when they happened, festered and grew to even greater proportions. By not being able to weigh familial loyalties against national security, an entire nation was put at risk.

How do we respond when the consequences of our actions, or the actions of others, threaten to steal our happy ending? Where do we go when our grief is overwhelming? We do like David; we go to the Lord. As you read through the Book of Psalms, you can find a few of them introduced as being written by David in times when life did not hand him a happy ending. Psalm 3 is introduced as, "A psalm of David. When he fled from his son Absalom." Hear what it says:

- ¹ LORD, how many are my foes!
How many rise up against me!
- ² Many are saying of me,
“God will not deliver him.”^[b]
- ³ But you, LORD, are a shield around me,
my glory, the One who lifts my head high.
- ⁴ I call out to the LORD,
and he answers me from his holy mountain.
- ⁵ I lie down and sleep;
I wake again, because the LORD sustains me.
- ⁶ I will not fear though tens of thousands
assail me on every side.
- ⁷ Arise, LORD!
Deliver me, my God!
Strike all my enemies on the jaw;
break the teeth of the wicked.
- ⁸ From the LORD comes deliverance.
May your blessing be on your people.

David knew that his happy ending did not depend on his actions or the actions of others. His happy ending was always to be found in the presence of his Lord.

We may not know the right answer to every situation we find ourselves in. There are times we are going to get things wrong, sometimes very wrong. But whether we get things right or not, we can still come before the throne of God seeking forgiveness and comfort for whatever pain we may have caused or are experiencing.

Our story today ends with a father mourning the loss of his son. There is no happy ending, only sorrow. Like David we will experience sorrow and setbacks in life. Like David we can come before an all-knowing, all-loving, and all-forgiving God and humble ourselves. While we are waiting for our happy ending, let us recall the closing words from our earlier hymn:

I heard the voice of Jesus say "I am this dark world's Light;
Look unto Me, thy morn shall rise and all thy day be bright."
I looked to Jesus, and I found in Him my Star, my Sun;
And in that light of life I'll walk, till traveling days are done.

Jesus is our happy ending.

Lynne McMullan Allebach

August 8, 2021

Hatfield Church of the Brethren