

“Out of the Depths”

Absalom was a middle child, the third son of six born to King David and his six wives. Now oldest and youngest children can usually find reasons to be glad about their place in the family. Not so middle children. They often aren't the biggest and strongest, they aren't the babies who get away with murder, they aren't really anything special, at least in their own minds. Sometimes they feel invisible. So they tend to go outside of the family for their relationships. With this dysfunctional family you had to.

Now it came to pass that David's oldest son Amnon raped Absalom's sister Tamar. Absalom waits his time—two years in fact—and then throws a party for all his brothers. They drink a lot of wine and Absalom has his servants kill Amnon. Absalom then runs away as fast as he can to his mother's family where he hides out for three years.

Scripture records that David mourned his son Amnon and then after three years mourned the absence of Absalom. So Absalom is invited back to Jerusalem, but David refuses to speak to him for another two years. Absalom then declares to David “If I am guilty, kill me” ...” and prostrated himself with his face to the ground before the king; and the king kissed Absalom.

And the very next day Absalom begins to plot his military coup and David is forced to flee Jerusalem. Absalom enters the city, has public sex with his father's concubines and takes over as King. But the old man still has a few tricks up his sleeve, Jerusalem is retaken and in spite of David's plea to the soldiers to deal gently with Absalom, Absalom's great head of hair is caught in an oak tree and scripture records “he was left hanging between heaven and earth.” Joab, David's general, comes and thrusts three spears into him where he hung—he is then tossed into an open pit and buried.

And the story concludes this way; “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 that I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!”

I visited with a member of our congregation this past week who had recently suffered a loss. We were able to sit and talk about grief openly. First, because we were both clergy and had walked with people from many different congregations through this most difficult journey. Secondly, we had both lost spouses and knew personally what a difficult journey mourning is.

But she had lost a son. And was on a journey that I knew nothing about. But because I know that certain events can trigger the tidal wave of emotion that can suddenly come crashing down, I asked her, “what are the hardest times?” (And she said I could share this with you) “It is going to the Dairy Queen.”

“Of course,” I said. And we were both on the verge of laughter and tears, as she continued, “I will never be able to go to the Dairy Queen with him again.”

The first Dairy Queen in Canada was opened in Melville, Saskatchewan in 1953. I can still remember walking home from elementary school (a two mile walk—I'm not exaggerating), stopping at the Dairy Queen and paying five cents for the ice-cream cone with a curl on top and licking it ever so slowly in the hope that it would last all the way home. I remember saving up all my nickels to splurge on a banana split — a feast fit for a king. Three scoops of ice cream: vanilla, chocolate and strawberry served in a row between the split banana. I watched as the pineapple topping was spooned over the

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vanilla ice cream, chocolate syrup over the chocolate, and strawberry topping over the strawberry. Then crushed nuts, whipped cream and finally maraschino cherries. It was like being between heaven and earth.

Last March, on my sixtieth birthday, my daughter bought me a cake, from the Dairy Queen, of course. And all these and more memories bring tears to my eyes because they are a common experience that reminds us of our whole lives and the lives of those we share it with.

Have you ever seen the face of a child when they have their first ice-cream cone—and I mean the sheer delight, not the ice cream all over their face. It is like a prayer that simply declares that God is good and at that point all your hopes and dreams for that child are wrapped up in that simple experience of sharing ice cream. And those hopes and dreams are relived every time that experience is shared. It is communion, Eucharist, thanksgiving.

Death stops the experience, halts the dreams, becomes an emptiness that plunges us to the very depths of existence. And so it was with David.

With the death of Saul and Jonathan he was able to be poetic,

“Your glory, O Israel, lies slain upon your high places! How the mighty have fallen! ... Saul and Jonathan, beloved and lovely! In life and in death they were not divided; they were swifter than eagles, they were stronger than lions. ... How the mighty have fallen in the midst of the battle! Jonathan lies slain upon your high places. I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan; greatly beloved were you to me; your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women. How the mighty have fallen, and the weapons of war perished!” (2 Samuel 1:19, 23, 25-27 NRSV)

David also lost the first child of Bathsheba at birth and his eldest who was murdered by Absalom, but here he is just plunged to the depths. “O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would that I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!”

But here I sat with a colleague who had lost her son. We sat in silence, and then she confessed to me that she had been looking for prayers for the dead and our United Church of Canada comes up short in this area. We pray for the living, the suffering the mourning, but not for those who have died.

Cynthia Bourgeault has ably pointed out that part of the problem is that our notion of spiritual growth, from our human perspective, is linked to linear time and progress. Thus time is an essential dimension to growth. Thus when “time is swallowed up in death” it means that growth beyond death is not possible. So at death you are either with God in spiritual union or you are not.

But in the Bible the important perspective is not time but love. The essential quality for spiritual growth is not time, but rather love. “Love is precisely that which calls forth the continued emergence of the beloved, that guides into being the new life, the new potentiality. Love’s nature is that it evokes an increase in being. Where there is love, there must be increase.” Where there is love there is continual growth, even for the dead.

It was Archbishop Romero’s practice to read at the Eucharist the names of those members of the community who had ‘disappeared’ or been called during the previous week to the Church Triumphant (those who had died). As the prayers of the community were spoken, the names would be lifted up, one after the other. And the congregation would respond to each name by boldly proclaiming ‘Present!’ (Presente!)

In our Communion Service the celebrant says, “Therefore we praise you, joining with the heavenly chorus, with prophets, apostles, and martyrs, and with those in every generation who have looked to you in hope, to proclaim with them your glory, in their unending hymn” and we sing the Sanctus together— Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might, heaven and earth are full, full of your glory. Hosanna in the highest.”

If we can sing with the dead, we can certainly pray for them, trusting that they will also pray with us. And even if we go to the Dairy Queen, those who have died are there with us. For we believe that nothing shall separate us from the love of Christ—from the love we have in Christ—not even death itself.

Thanks be to God.