

Title: Sustaining Presence of God
Date: 2 June, 2013
Text: 2 Samuel 13-18, Psalm 3
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Every thought that you family is really weird? That your family has taken dysfunction to a whole new level? I will often describe Newlife as ‘one big, happy, sometimes dysfunctional family.’ Is your family more the, ‘one small, sometimes happy, often times dysfunctional type of family’?

The Bible is full of some really messed up, dysfunctional families. In the fact you are hard pressed to find a ‘normal’ family in the bible. Whatever ‘normal’ is. As none other than Homer Simpson puts it:

The bible is full of messed up people - except for this one guy.
(Homer Simpson)

Today I want to tell perhaps the saddest, most tragic stories of family dysfunction in the bible. Let’s jump straight in:

Amnon son of David fell in love with Tamar, the beautiful sister of Absalom son of David. Amnon became so obsessed with his sister Tamar that he made himself ill. She was a virgin, and it seemed impossible for him to do anything to her.
(2 Samuel 13:1-2)

Right away we should be thinking, ‘What the...!’

To unpack this opening we need a bit of background about David’s family.

David was Israel’s greatest and most loved king. David did not have one wife; he had seven wives, not to mention some concubines. Busy man.

David was also father to 19 sons and one daughter, whose name was Tamar. Amnon was the eldest of his sons and the crown prince, the successor to David’s throne. Absalom was David’s third born son and brother of Tamar.

The whole sordid story that unfolds begins with Amnon being sexually obsessed with Tamar, his half-sister. Tamar was a virgin and as such was heavily protected by palace guards. Sensing Amnon’s obsession, one of his advisors and cousin Jonadab, hatches a conspiracy.

He says to Amnon, ‘Pretend to be ill, and when your father David comes to visit you, ask for your sister Tamar to come and attend you and cook your favourite meal.’

Amnon does exactly that; David visits, Tamar is sent for and she cooks Amnon his favourite meal and when she takes it into him lying on his sick bed, Amnon shocks her when he asks her to sleep with him. Tamar refuses, but Amnon won’t take no for an answer:

(Amnon) refused to listen to her, and since he was stronger than she, he raped her. Then Amnon hated her with intense hatred. In fact, he hated her more than he had loved her. Amnon said to her, “Get up and get out!”
(2 Samuel 13:14-15)

In the end Amnon has Tamar thrown out of his home. Tamar covers her head with ashes and tears her ornate robes as a vivid sign of her desolation and disgrace. Tamar’s life has been ‘laid waste’ by the brutal actions of her brother Amnon. As one commentator poignantly puts it, she is now ‘a widow who has never been a wife.’-

David eventually hears what has happened and his angry, but tellingly does nothing, neither disciplining Amnon, nor comforting Tamar. It seems David is a hands-off dad.

Meanwhile Amnon finds shelter in the home of her brother Absalom. And it is there that the seeds of revenge are sown. This is what we read:

Absalom never said a word to Amnon, either good or bad; he hated Amnon because he had disgraced his sister Tamar.
(2 Samuel 13:22)

Absalom is seething with rage, but suppresses it.

Often in families anger goes underground. Our partner, or our child or our parent says something or does something that cuts us to our core, but we don't air our hurt or grievance. Instead we allow that hurt to find a quiet corner of our heart where it finds fertile ground to grow into resentment, bitterness and, if we are not careful, destructive rage.

A few years ago I used a bottle of coke to illustrate the destructive power of repressed anger. Someone hurts us and it stirs us up emotionally, but rather than expressing our pain constructively we suppress it. But the knocks keep on coming, the hurt multiplies and emotional turmoil bubbles along and eventually there is a comment or a slight that lifts the lid on what we have worked so hard to keep buried and its spews out of us, creating an awful mess all around us – doing irretrievable damage.

Suppressed anger always erupts. Always.

In Ephesians Paul says:

In your anger do not sin: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold.
(Ephesians 4:26-27)

Some of you are angry this morning. You can barely keep a lid on it. Someone in your family or close circle of relationships has hurt you and they have no idea because you haven't told them. You may even be sitting next to them.

Perhaps the most important thing you can do today is go home and ask God to help you to slowly, slowly take the lid of those suppressed emotions and deal with them. You owe it to yourself, to those you love and to God. If you need to, and I stringly encourage you to do so, seek the advice of a Christian counselor.

For two, seething years Absalom bottles up his anger waiting for just the right moment to avenge his sister. Eventually he tricks an unsuspecting Amnon to travel to a wilderness area where Absalom's men murder him.

Having ordered the murder of his brother, Absalom flees into self-imposed exile –where he stays for three years.

David is grief-stricken, having effectively lost two sons – one murdered and one in exile. The bible says that David longed to be reconciled to Absalom, but never took the initiative to do so, perhaps feeling constrained by expectations that he shouldn't- that it was beneath a king to do so. Tim Keller articulates the sometimes overwhelming burden of being a parent, especially when you are estranged from your child:

Once you become a parent you will never be happier than your unhappiest child. Your heart is tied up with them.
(Tim Keller)

Eventually, after three years, David summons Absalom and he returns to Jerusalem from exile. But even though they are now living in the same city, Absalom and his father don't meet face to face for two years. They were so close to being reconciled – and yet so far.

Describing Absalom, the bible says:

In all Israel there was not a man so highly praised for his handsome appearance as Absalom. From the top of his head to the sole of his foot there was no blemish in him.
(2 Samuel 14:25)

The bible describes how once a year Absalom would have a haircut, and that his cut hair weighed more than two kilograms. I think is meant to be a big deal, so I hope you are all suitably impressed.

A couple of days ago Sue could stand it no longer. Our son Joel's bedroom, which I have described here before as a cesspit, was in a particularly disgusting state. Searching for missing dishes, Sue entered where angels fear to tread and came out with arms full of empty glasses, dirty dishes, chip packets, ice cream wrappers and lolly bags. As she walked down the stairs, she looked over her shoulder and said to me, 'Just like his...father'. (Have you ever noticed that whenever someone says something like that it's usually not a compliment?)

Truth is, Joel is a lot like me, as he is a lot like his mum as well. Our 'family of origin' shapes us genetically and socially. And so it was with both Amnon and Absalom.

Amnon would have been old enough to see his father commit adultery with the woman who would become his seventh wife, Bathsheba. If dad could take a woman he wanted by force, why couldn't he?

Absalom was likely old enough to see David murder Uriah in order to take Bathsheba as his wife. If dad could premeditate murder, why shouldn't he?

The sins of the sons were sown by the sins of the father.

Again in Ephesians Paul says:

Fathers, do not provoke anger in your children, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.
(Ephesians 6:4)

Parents, if we want our kids to grow in character and faith – we must model it! What spiritual example are you modelling for your kids? What Christ like activities and behaviour are they seeing in you that they can and will mimic?

We cannot be passive; we must be active in our kid's faith development. As parents we, not the church, not a Christian school – have the primary responsibility for raising our kids is the discipline and instruction of the Lord. As a church we will partner you, resource you and pray for you. But parents, you must take the lead!

Back to the story; on his third attempt, and after two years – seven years after the rape of Tamar and five years after the murder of Amnon - Absalom finally comes face to face with his father David.

The king summoned Absalom, and he came in and bowed down with his face to the ground before the king. And the king kissed Absalom.
(2 Samuel 14:33)

This is the happy ending; this is the Hollywood script! By kissing Absalom, David was welcoming his estranged son back into his household. Father and son were now reconciled. Unfortunately the story doesn't end there.

After years being ignored by his father and still angry at the rape of his sister, Absalom has hatched another plan – a shocking one to mount a coup against his father.

Absalom is a charismatic leader and a consummate politician. Day after day he positions himself in Jerusalem at the city gate where he intercepts people coming to King David seeking a judgement in disputes, lying that his Father David was not available, nor interested in meeting them. He was so successful in his plans that we read:

Absalom...stole the hearts of the people of Israel.
(2 Samuel 15:6)

Earlier I said that suppressed anger always erupts. Equally true is that:

Unresolved conflict always corrupts.

Unresolved conflicts corrupt relationships in families. David's hands off parenting that meant he never adequately dealt with Absalom's earlier sin and rebellion. As a result, the relationship between father and son was corrupted to the core. Years of silence and estrangement had taken their toll and the heart of the son was forever turned from his father. Family life is fertile

ground for unresolved conflict. Rather than dealing with stuff, we put a veneer of niceness over everything and play ‘happy families’. In Romans, Paul says:

If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.
(Romans 12:18)

If it is possible: sadly not every conflict will be resolved. It takes two willing parties.

As far as it depends on you: someone needs to take the initiative to resolve a conflict. David should have and Absalom could have, but tragically, neither did.

Live at peace with everyone: peace and harmony in family, home and life should be the goal of all who declare their allegiance to the Prince of Peace.

Is there an unresolved conflict in your family? Have you done everything – as far as it depends on you – to resolve it with God’s help.

Let’s get back to the story. After four years, having laid the groundwork, having won the hearts of the people – Absalom’s conspiracy grows and outright rebellion erupts. Word comes to David:

A messenger came and told David, “The hearts of the people of Israel are with Absalom.”
(2 Samuel 15:13)

David’s life is now openly under threat from Absalom. Hopelessly outnumbered, David and his household flee Jerusalem, leaving behind nothing except ten concubines. David takes with him the Ark of Covenant – the symbol of the very presence of God. As he parades east from Jerusalem, the road is lined with people weeping. Year before David had danced as the Ark of the Covenant was brought into the city; now as the Ark is taken out of Jerusalem, the people weep. While some of the people lining the road weep, others hurl stones and abuse at David. David’s pain and shame is profound. Eventually David orders the Ark to be taken back into the city:

David continued up the Mount of Olives, weeping as he went; his head was covered and he was barefoot. All the people with him covered their heads too and were weeping as they went up.
(2 Samuel 15:30)

At the very time David and his entourage disappear over the brow of the Mount of Olives, Absalom and his army arrive in Jerusalem. Advised by his officials, Absalom takes revenge on his father by falling into the very same sin of his brother Amnon – rape.

They pitched a tent for Absalom on the roof, and he slept with his father’s concubines in the sight of all Israel.
(2 Samuel 16:22)

In raping David’s concubines, Absalom is effectively declaring that his father David is dead and that he is now king.

Absalom is not finished. He amasses an army and pursues David and his men. There is a critical delay allowing David and his men time to flee and prepare for a fierce battle in a heavily forested area in the Jordan valley. Twenty thousand men die in one day. Against incredible odds, David’s men prevail and rout Absalom’s army. Before the battle, David gave express orders to his men not to harm Absalom – to be gentle with him. But it was not to be:

Now Absalom happened to meet David’s men. He was riding his mule, and as the mule went under the thick branches of a large oak, Absalom’s hair got caught in the tree. He was left hanging in midair, while the mule he was riding kept on going.
(2 Samuel 18:9)

It’s almost comical; you can’t make this stuff up. Absalom is swinging in the breeze, hanging from a tree by his long, mullet style, sunsilk shiny, Ashley and Martin thick hair. Knowing that while Absalom is alive he will always be a threat to the throne, David’s men kill him where he hangs and bury him in the forest. Messengers are sent to David with news of the victory, but all he asks is:

'Is the young man Absalom safe?'

Eventually David is given the terrible news, and he responds with the unimaginable grief of a parent losing a child:

The king was shaken. He went up to the room over the gateway and wept. As he went, he said: "O my son Absalom! My son, my son Absalom! If only I had died instead of you—O Absalom, my son, my son!"
(2 Samuel 18:33)

This is the end of the terrible story of Absalom, Amnon, Tamar and David. Two sons are dead, a daughter lives as a widow and a father is overwhelmed by grief and regret. Strangely silent through the whole story it seems is God. Where is God in this awful, tragic story?

God is not absent in this story. In fact God is especially present. To discover how we turn to the Psalms. David wrote many of the psalms. In a way the psalms he wrote are a window into his soul. They are David's personal journal. Here's the thing; at least five of the psalms David wrote were written during or about the rebellion of Absalom. Scholars call them the 'Psalms of the Great Rebellion'.

The most famous of these psalms is Psalm 3. Here is a photo from my bible. Read the description at the top of psalm 3, taken from the earliest Hebrew manuscripts:

A psalm of David. When he fled from his son Absalom.

Psalm 3 was composed by David as he marched in disgrace from Jerusalem – as he sought shelter in the Judean forest – as he wondered whether he would live or die and where it all went wrong.

David begins:

LORD, how many are my foes!
How many rise up against me!
Many are saying of me,
"God will not deliver him."
(Psalm 3:1-2)

At the same time David is running from Absalom and his army, he is running to God in prayer. David is honest with God about his circumstances – how desperate they are. Its honest, gut-deep, tear-drenched prayer. In the end its hope-filled prayer. David presses on:

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.
(Psalm 3:1-5)

In the midst of family turmoil we could only begin to imagine and with his life and legacy under very real threat, David finds hope in the sustaining presence of God. 'I wake again, because the Lord sustains me.'

In 1964 Maurice Sendak wrote and illustrated what has become a classic in children's literature, 'Where the Wild Things Are.' A few years ago there was a film that brought the book to life, expanding the original storyline. The film narrates the adventures of Max, an imaginative child who feels neglected by his mother and older sister. He escapes into a fantastical world of hairy, monstrous creatures. When these "wild things" threaten to devour him, Max pretends to possess magical powers and manages to convince the monsters to make him their king.

The creatures come to believe that Max has been sent to abolish suffering in their world and to establish permanent peace and happiness. And so they ask him: "Will you keep out all the sadness?"

Still playacting his role as king and miracle worker, Max declares:

I have a sadness shield that keeps out all the sadness, and it's big enough for all of us.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if you could go through life with a sadness shield that keeps out all the sadness? If we had a sadness shield there would be no grief or pain; hurt or sorrow; no tears or depression. No family conflict, no relationship breakdowns, no separations or divorces or estrangements.

The Lord is David's shield. This shield does not protect David from sadness and grief. Rather, this shield protects his life from his enemies and his heart from being destroyed by his grief. Rather than giving up in the midst of his pain, David gives over his life to God and there finds the shelter that protects his life and soul. In another of the Psalms of the Great Rebellion, written during, or about this tumultuous time in David's life, he writes:

Because you are my help,
I sing in the shadow of your wings.
My soul clings to you;
Your right hand upholds me.
(Psalms 63:6-7)

In the midst of almost unbearable grief and pain, David finds solace in the sustaining presence of God. God does not deliver David completely from his circumstances – he loses two sons and a daughter is disgraced – but God does deliver him in his circumstances.

Jeff Manion puts it this way. Sometimes God delivers us from the storm. Sometimes he delivers us in the storm.

As we finish, let me read a recollection of Christian psychologist, Larry Crabb:

One Saturday afternoon, I decided I was a big boy and could use the bathroom without anyone's help. So I climbed the stairs, closed and locked the door behind me, and for the next few minutes felt very self-sufficient.

Then it was time to leave. I couldn't unlock the door. I tried with every ounce of my three-year-old strength, but I couldn't do it. I panicked. I felt again like a very little boy as the thought went through my head, "I might spend the rest of my life in this bathroom."

My parents—and likely the neighbors—heard my desperate scream.

"Are you okay?" Mother shouted through the door she couldn't open from the outside. "Did you fall? Have you hit your head?"

"I can't unlock the door!" I yelled. "Get me out of here!"

I wasn't aware of it right then, but Dad raced down the stairs, ran to the garage to find the ladder, hauled it off the hooks, and leaned it against the side of the house just beneath the bedroom window. With adult strength, he pried it open, then climbed into my prison, walked past me, and with that same strength, turned the lock and opened the door.

"Thanks, Dad," I said—and ran out to play.

That's how I thought the Christian life was supposed to work. When I get stuck in a tight place, I should do all I can to free myself. When I can't, I should pray. Then God shows up. He hears my cry—"Get me out of here! I want to play!"—and unlocks the door to the blessings I desire.

Sometimes he does. But now, no longer three years old and approaching sixty, I'm realizing the Christian life doesn't work that way. And I wonder, are any of us content with God? Do we even like him when he doesn't open the door we most want opened—when a marriage doesn't heal, when rebellious kids still rebel, when friends betray, when financial

reverses threaten our comfortable way of life, when health worsens despite much prayer, when loneliness intensifies and depression deepens?

God has climbed through the small window into my dark room. But he doesn't walk by me to turn the lock that I couldn't budge. Instead, he sits down on the bathroom floor and says, "Come sit with me!" He seems to think that climbing into the room to be with me matters more than letting me out to play.

I don't always see it that way. "Get me out of here!" I scream. "If you love me, *unlock the door!*"

Dear friend, the choice is ours. Either we can keep asking him to give us what we think will make us happy—to escape our dark room and run to the playground of blessings—or we can accept his invitation to sit with him, for now, perhaps, in darkness, and to seize the opportunity to know him better and represent him well in this difficult world.