

Church of the Crossroads  
Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time  
August 13, 2006  
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OUT OF THE DEPTHS

2 Samuel 18:5-9, 15, 19-33  
Psalm 130  
Mark 10:17-27

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 I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!"

- 2 Samuel 18:33

This is one of the most moving, poignant cries uttered by a human being in all of scripture. It is filled with anguish and pathos. It is a cry that moves us. It is comparable to the cry of the psalmist: "Out of the depths I cry to you, O God. O God, hear my voice."

Behind the cry is a story, a story of deep conflict and struggle. Absalom is King David's son. He is a rebel son, a son who has decided to stake his very life against the life of his father. He has aligned himself with the forces of Israel. David is the King of Judah. The enmity between Judah and Israel grows, and David the king must decide to do battle with his enemy, even though it means that his army must go to war against his own son Absalom. David, the father, however, is anguished. He sends word to the front and tells his own military leaders to spare the life of his son.

War, however, has a life of its own, and killing becomes the norm. After the terrible battle, when it is reported that twenty thousand men died and that many and more were claimed by the forest, Absalom was riding his mule and he rode into a tree. His head got caught in the branches so that "he was left hanging between heaven and earth." It was then that ten young men, the armor bearers of Joab, the military leader of Judah's forces, surrounded Absalom and killed him.

Then we are caught up in the drama of how the word of Absalom's death must get to his father, King David. First, Ahimaaz, son of Zadok,

offers to be the messenger. Joab says that he cannot allow that. He chooses instead a nameless Cushite to tell King David the news. Ahimaaz decides to go anyway, against the better wishes of Joab, and the two messengers race toward the place where David is. Ahimaaz outruns the Cushite and reaches David first, but does not have the courage to tell him about the fate of his son. The Cushite then arrives, and when David inquires about his son's fate, he says, "May the enemies of my lord the king, and all who rise up to do you harm, be like that young man." Dead, like that young man, David's son. It is then that we read,

The king was deeply moved, and went up to the chamber over the gate, and wept; and as he wept, he said, "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!"

Our hearts break for King David. He is both a king and a father, and there is no way his decision to go to war against Judah can be made with ease, without the awareness of a deep moral ambiguity. Shall he choose to be a king or a father? As a king, he must be concerned about the security of his own people. As a father, he must be concerned about the life of his wayward son. He is caught between two loyalties, and we feel the struggle. His cry upon hearing the death of his son, speaks a thousand words, a thousand cries. His anguish betrays the deeply felt grief of a father for loss of his son, and also the consequences of a decision to go to war that for David must have been filled with moral ambiguity.

One might hope that such anguish could be felt by the kings, the leaders of our world, by the leaders of Israel as they snuff out the lives of Lebanese men, women, and (oh! my God) the children, by the leaders of Hezbollah as they lob missiles towards their Israeli targets, also targets that include men, women, and (oh yes) children, and, yes, by the leaders of our own nation when they decide that we must go to war against another people. If our world's leaders were to feel the anguish of King David, their decisions might turn out to be very different.

Yet, most important and significant ethical decisions are filled with ambiguity. I am not speaking of those little moral decisions, such as a decision to inform a salesclerk that she has returned too much change, or informing a passerby that he has dropped a twenty dollar bill on the street. I am speaking of those decisions that inevitably place us in a morally

awkward place. Perhaps it is a teacher who must make a decision whether to pressure a student to fulfill the mandates of “No Child Left Behind” or follow her own gut feeling that she must care more about the child’s basic emotional wellbeing. Perhaps it is a clergy person who must make a decision whether to act as a pastor or as an employer. Many of us carry more than one role in our work situations, and sometimes our roles are in conflict with one another, just as in the case of David, who was both a king and a father. We might describe the conflict as a conflict between our Christian values rooted in compassion, peace and justice, and the values of a secular society that takes little note of the deeper values of the Gospel. We are part of both worlds, and therein lies the root of the moral conflict we often experience.

Not only the decisions of world leaders are filled with moral ambiguity; most of our decisions are as well. On the one hand, we may advocate for the needs of the poor, but the success of our financial investments is often dependent upon the exploitation of the poor. We may ask that our church’s investments be free from involvement in war making and harmful drugs, but who knows what kind of investments account for the success of our own pension funds? We may feel morally good about purchasing a hybrid automobile and we should, but our basic lifestyle cannot help but consume more of the earth’s resources than is good for the wellbeing of the earth.

Much of American Christianity would like to posit moral decisions as black and white, yes and no, but most of the time our lives are filled with moral ambiguity. We live not in a moral world of black and white, but in a moral world dominated by gray. We are not unlike the rich man of the Gospel reading from Mark who comes to Jesus asking “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” He has followed to the letter of the law the moral demands of the ten commandments, but this is not enough, for he is rich, and is therefore asked by Jesus to sell all he has and give the money to the poor, something that he cannot bring himself to do.

None of us can stand in the presence of God as morally and ethically pure. As the old spiritual goes, it’s not my brother or my sister, but it’s me, O Lord, standing in the need of prayer. We all stand in need of prayer, because the power of evil is not only out there. It is not only present in the “evil doers” as our president Bush has named them. Evil is also a reality also within our own lives.

Out of the depths David speaks his anguish, and out of the depths our own cry arises to God. In the words of Psalm 130,

*Out of the depths I cry to you, O God,  
O God, hear my voice!*

*Let your ears be attentive to the voice of  
my supplications!  
If you, O God, should mark iniquities,  
who could stand?*

The answer: no one. No one can stand. No one is morally pure, as much as we try. King David's story serves to inform each and everyone's lives.

It is a humbling thought, my friends, that none of us can stand, morally good, in the presence of God. Reinhold Niebuhr was right. He came to believe that his own book *Moral Man in Immoral Society* should have been named *Immoral Man in an even more Immoral Society*.

Frederich Buechner, the novelist and preacher, once said that before there can be good news there must be bad news. Surely, we have heard the bad news this morning, but now we must ready ourselves for the good news. The good news, also in the words of the 130<sup>th</sup> Psalm is that even though none can stand in the presence of God, with God there is forgiveness. Or, in the words of our Gospel reading, with God all things are possible. Even the rich can enter the kingdom of God!

Good news, indeed – it's the good news of our forgiveness that we announce each and every Sunday following the prayer of confession.

The psalmist says that the good news of forgiveness is given to us that we might revere God. One might think that reverence for God would precede the cry and the good news of forgiveness, but here it is the opposite. It is forgiveness that leads to reverence. This is the kind of reverence for God that encourages us to begin again. Because we human beings most of the time are incapable of making morally pure and unambiguous decisions does not excuse us from trying to do so. After each word of forgiveness, we must begin again.

Reverence for God also leads to hope. “*I wait for God, my soul waits, and in God’s word I hope; my soul waits for God more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning.*” Walter Brueggemann tells us that the words *wait* and *hope* are rough synonyms. They carry the same meaning. The waiting-hoping is like a watchman waiting expectantly for the relief that comes with the dawn.

Our reverence for God “means to have confidence that things as they are (in the depth) are not as they will be. Life will be transformed. Forgiveness leads to liberation from life as it is presently organized.” (Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms*, p. 106) Good news, indeed.

And so it is, my friends, that the moral ambiguity of our lives is not the last word. The good news of our forgiveness begins with our cry from the depths, and that cry is impossible if we fail to see our complicity in the power of evil. Let us, then, set aside any moral pretension and pride that may linger in us, and in humility place our hope and trust in God’s mercy and compassion and forgiveness. Then, we may continue the journey of our lives and more and more become the human beings God created us to be.