

2 Samuel 18:31-33

Then the Cushite came; and the Cushite said, 'Good tidings for my lord the king! For the Lord has vindicated you this day, delivering you from the power of all who rose up against you.' 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!'

Is It a Name or Notoriety?

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Absalom was David's third son, and as Joel was reading that poignant section where David the king learned of Absalom's death, and the lament, "Absalom, Absalom! Would that I would have died rather than you." It's in the context of a son who decided to go in armed battle against his father. William Faulkner wrote the novel, *Absalom, Absalom!*, that has some touch points with that biblical text. It's about Thomas Sutpen, who built an empire, who wanted to be known, to make a name for himself, and so he purchased land and he cared how people thought of him, but that was about it. Sutpen wanted "not the anonymous wife and the anonymous children, but two names, the stainless wife and the unimpeachable father-in-law on the license, the patent. Yes, patent, with a gold seal and red ribbons too if that had been practicable. But not for himself. She would have called the gold seal and the ribbons vanity, but then so had vanity conceived that house and built it in a strange place and with little else but his bare hands and further handicapped by the chance and probability of meddling interference arising out of the disapprobation of all communities toward any situation which they do not understand."

It's important to us as Christians to look at other mediums, other ways in which faith and struggle are spoken and concluded. This is why we've seen the movie and we're going to discuss the movie at 10:45. Pam and Joel are going to lead us in that at Crosswalk. I invite you to go to that this morning, *Angels and Demons*. *Absalom, Absalom!* this novel written by William Faulkner, he won the Noble Prize for literature and established a writing style called the stream of consciousness. *Absalom, Absalom!* is about Thomas Sutpen, who arrived from Western Virginia with slaves, to the town of Jefferson, Mississippi, and obtained a hundred square acres, he called it "the hundred," from a native American tribe and he built this plantation. His mansion, his marriage, everything for show. It's a sad story dreamed up by the author's mind but copied from the pages of the Bible. It's about greed, adultery, murder, bigotry. And Faulkner used the II Samuel story of Absalom, son of David, as his model.

Absalom is a word that has meaning for us. Abba, that means father, that means loving parent, it is the word Jesus spoke when he prayed to God, Abba. Shalom, that means

peace, Abba, Shalom, it means God is found in peace. Absalom, Absalom, God is found in peace of mind this morning in this stream of consciousness called a sermon. Let's see if we can find God, and if we can find God in peace of mind. Where do we find shalom, peace? Where do we begin? We begin with an answer to the question, "Who am I?" We begin with identity. The word for God is a clue. One of the words for God, the Hebrew word, is Jahweh. It means, "I am." Shalom, peace, it begins with knowing "I am" and knowing "who I am." And if you asked David who he was, he would say, "I am the boy who stood up to Goliath with the slingshot. And if you asked Zaccheus who he was, he would say, "I am the little man who climbed the tree to see Jesus, and if you asked the woman at the well, she would say, "I am the one who gave Jesus a drink of water." And if you asked Paul, he would say, "I am a tentmaker."

We're living in a time, and it's a good thing, when people are discovering who they are, all kinds of people, and it's a good thing. I read an essay written by a woman who had done some research on reindeer. According to the State Game and Fish in Alaska, both male and female reindeer grow antlers each summer, and male reindeer lose their antlers at the beginning of winter, so that by December 24, their antlers are gone. Female reindeer retain their antlers until they give birth in the spring. Do you see where we're going with this? The Christmas legend shows Santa's reindeer with antlers. Therefore, Rudolph and Blitzen and Comet and Cupid and Donner were girls. Girl reindeer. And the writer concludes, "We should have known. Only women would be able to drag a fat man in a red velvet suit all around the world in one night and not get lost."

I've got to put this pulpit on the other side near the door. Yes, you are Woman. Identity. Absalom was the son of the king. That was his identity, and he wanted what the king had. And Thomas Sutpen, the builder of the mansion, the owner of a hundred acres, he was somebody. We find shalom when we know who we are. I confess that I have made mistakes in my life. I have regrets. Not big ones. Maybe I should. But not big ones. Three churches ago, telling the church member he ought to be lobotomized, I think was probably not a good move on my part. Standing up to six bishops in the Western Jurisdiction and calling them hypochondriachal wimps without spines or integrity, was probably not wise. But my biggest regret is the name I have allowed myself to be called. My name is Charles. When we moved here in 1970, my boss, who then became a bishop, announced the first day at work that since the church organist's name was Charles, we couldn't have two of those on the staff with the same name, and from then on, my name would be Chuck. Chuck, indeed. I should have said, "My name is Charles. My name was Charles, it is Charles, it always will be Charles. It means manly. You look it up. It's who I am, and that's what you're gonna call me. Deal with it." I regret I didn't do that. My identity has been formed by an arrogant boss who was too lazy to adjust, because I was too weak to stand up and be a man. From now on it's Charles. My identity. My shalom. It's Charles.

What's yours? How do you see yourself, and are you comfortable in your skin? It was Edgar Guest who wrote that beautiful poem, "Song of Myself." "I have to live with myself and so I have to be fit for myself to know." Identity. Who I am. Erma Bombeck said, "You know, you can tell yourself famous people started out as exceptional. You can

tell yourself that famous people had advantages. You can tell yourself that the conditions under which famous people achieved were different from yours. Or you can be like that woman I knew who sat at her kitchen window, year after year, and watched everyone else do it, and then one day, she said to herself, 'It's my turn.'" Erma Bombeck finishes that thought by adding, "I was 37 years old at the time." Identity. It's my turn. Who am I? Shalom, peace, it begins with identity. Then reputation. "Who do you say that I am?" That was important to Jesus, asking his disciples, "Who do you say that I am? Who do people say that I am?" Reputation. We establish identity. We develop reputation. But reputation is fragile. Faulkner wrote, "We do not know whether what we see is what we're looking at."

Now our church has a new reputation. I didn't announce this, but I'm proud to announce it, because I've been talking about it for the last month, how we were nominated to be the church with the best church library for any church or synagogue in this whole nation. We were nominated - we won. That's our reputation. One church I was in had the reputation for having had the most funerals in the Annual Conference.

If you look at the play yard in the south parking lot, one of the forty-foot black walnut trees fell this week. Tuesday night. The trustees were meeting. It fell. And if you go out there, you can see what's left of it. You can look at the trunk of the thing, and where it went into the ground, it's rotted out. It's all rotted out. It was being held together by a thread. It looked big and strong, but it was weak. It had the reputation. It's self-identity was different, and it fell. What should we do? We had the thought to invite church members to come in with chainsaws and cut it apart and take it away, but the idea of First United Methodist Church members in a confined space, with chainsaws, felt a little bit like the beginning of a horror movie, and the establishment of a bad reputation. We'd rather be known as the church with the best library in the country, than the church with people who have the most prostheses in the country.

What's your reputation? What do people think of you? We will find shalom if our reputation and our identity are congruent and we're pleased and happy with both. If we think of ourselves and how others think of us as somewhat the same, and it's good.... Daniel Meyer was a pastor at a church in Oak Brook, Illinois, a Church of Christ. He tells a story, I don't know if it's true. A man named Jerry sent a check for ten thousand dollars to his university alumni office. The school officials were surprised, because Jerry had never responded to the annual campaign. In a note that was attached to the check, Jerry said that his gift was the result of the effective solicitation letter that he had received. Well, the fund-raisers went crazy looking back through their files until they could find a copy of the letter they sent to him, which was just like the letter they had sent to everyone else, to graduates all over the country, but there was one difference. The intent was to send a personal letter, and so the greeting to each recipient would be personal. Obviously, somebody keyed in the wrong name to the would-be donor. A mistake was made, in this case a good mistake, because instead of the greeting that said, "Dear Jerry," the greeting read, "Dear Jerk." Obviously, Jerry didn't want his reputation to continue that way, so that year he made a donation. The finance committee will meet this Thursday to determine if that would work on our congregation. I think not.

What is our reputation? How do others see us? Robert Burns wrote that beautiful poem, “O wad some power the giftie gie us, To see oursel's as ithers see us! ...” I spent a year in Scotland to be able to say “O wad some power the giftie gie us, To see oursel's as ithers see us! ...” It’s the only culture I got that year. What is forgotten when that poem is quoted, is the title of the poem. It’s “To a Louse.” Burns noticed a parasite on the hat of the woman who was sitting in front of him on one of those rare occasions when he was actually in church. To see ourselves as other see us. Shalom will come when reputation, how others see us, is congruent with identity, who we are, and we’re happy with both.

Finally, legacy. It’s important. What do we leave behind? What are we leaving for the people who follow us? How will the world be different because we lived? Tom Mullen wrote a book entitled, *Middle Age and Other Mixed Blessings*. He writes about that time in our lives when we begin to think about our mortality. “Middle age,” he says, “reminds us that if we are technically not old yet, we are absolutely no longer young.” We reflect upon the meaning of what we do. That’s more important than how successful we are. We conclude that status is far less important than relationships. Enjoying the company of those sharing the journey is as important as the destination. And he goes on to say, you know, there are opportunities that come with this age, and even later, opportunities come. Opportunity knocks. It’s just that it takes you a little longer to get to the door, if you know what I mean. We come to a time in our lives when we are more concerned about what will be than what has been. William Faulkner said it. “Not everything happens at once, and is finished”. It’s like ripples, moving and spreading. What are the ripples we’ve made? Where will they spread?

Robert McAfee Brown, he died in the last couple of years, he was a theologian, a writer, chaplain at Stanford University, preacher. A great preacher. His daddy was a Presbyterian pastor. He was a Presbyterian. He said once, “Being a Presbyterian doesn’t keep me from sinning, but it sure keeps me from enjoying it.” At his funeral, a friend said of him, “In his company, we tended to be our better selves.” That’s the legacy he left. This afternoon we will meet to celebrate the life of Sam Bonson. Last time I saw Sam, he was in the ICU at the hospital after surgery. I asked his family what he had done for a living, prior to his retirement. They said he worked for NASA, that he worked on the space shuttle, that he helped develop those big tanks on the shuttle. I was thinking, the space shuttle has just returned to the earth. It was used to repair the Hubble telescope. What’s Sam’s legacy? What ripples did he make? How far did they go? To the shuttle, to the Hubble, to the edge of the universe, because we can see it.

Bart Ehrman has written a book entitled *Jesus, Interrupted*. He is, like many scholars, of the opinion that much of the Christian faith has been designed and developed by those who came after Jesus. And he goes on to say, “It’s important to kind of realize that the Christian faith is really the faith about Jesus, not the faith of Jesus.” I don’t disagree with that, but on the other hand it seems to me that there is much of the essence of the religion of Jesus that we still have. He left a legacy. It may not be literally in the words and stories that we have, but it’s between the lines. It’s still there. There are ripples moving on and spreading from his day to our day. It happened at the table. It was there that his legacy

was left. Once upon a time he said, "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you, not as the world gives." And then when he took the bread and broke it, and he gave them the cup of wine and blessed it, he said, "Take this in remembrance of me, given for the forgiveness of sin." In other words, he's saying, "I have lived my life in service for you. This is my legacy, the one I leave you." That is was, and he said it at the Last Supper where we celebrate that, and we will today. But it's not the only place he said it. I mean, you can look at almost any part of his life, and you can see how he lived it. When he spoke of how the first shall be last, how the servant is greater than the one that is served, he was leaving his legacy. When he shared with the crowd at the side of the hill the Beatitudes, it was a clear statement about how the meek will inherit the earth and how those who stand up for what is right, they're the ones who will inherit God's kingdom. Jesus' legacy like ripples unfolding, reminding us of God, a loving parent. Reminding us of truth as something that will set us free. Reminding us of the least of these, and doing for them as doing for him. Jesus' legacy at the table. But what about you? What is your legacy? How will you be remembered? If, when the shadows deepen and night is coming and they will remember how you worked so hard to keep the light shining in the dark. If when the pain was pushing to the point of panic, and they recall how you were there to comfort the afflicted. Or if, when the world grew into a calm complacency, and they recall how you disrupted the silence with a reminder that injustice cannot be tolerated. If there was a time you taught someone what they never would have known, that is your legacy. There was a moment when you stepped forward and spoke a word that was heard around the block, or the world. It was within you but it went beyond you. It came from you, but you were not its source, just the one who spoke it, just the one who did it as it should have been done, you left your legacy. Absalom, Abba, Father, God, Shalom, Peace. Can we live so that others think of us as we think of ourselves? We can. And can we leave something of ourselves that will outlive us? We will. Who we are, how we are seen, what we will leave when we're gone. Identity, reputation, legacy, leads to peace. And if we find peace, shalom, we will find Abba, we will find God. Absalom, Absalom, peace and God be with you. "Do this in remembrance of me," Jesus said.