“Prayers of the People”

One of the reasons many of us avoid texts like this is that there is simply too much back story to fill in. How far back into Second Samuel do we need to go to understand what is going on with Absalom? Do we need to go back to chapter 13 to recount the sordid details of Absalom and brother Ammon and sister Tamar to get some idea of what is going on here? Do we need to present David as the one who failed his offspring or Absalom and his immediate sense of justice to explain something of the tension that existed between Absalom and David? It might help us understand our text for this week a little better.

Perhaps telling Absalom’s story would bring some wisdom to the proclamation this week. His rakish charm and cleverness bordering on lawlessness, giving Absalom a Captain Jack Sparrow sort of appeal, might explain how he has become a threat to his father’s reign as king of Israel. Go ahead, read chapters 13 through 18 and get a glimpse of who this prince really was. A hero? A villain? A rogue or heartthrob? All the above? Capture him in your mind and then decide just how much of the story you need to tell to make sense of this text, to give the hearers an idea of what was going on.

On the other hand, what do we really need to know to proclaim this message? This is not to excuse the preacher from doing the homework that enables proclamation to take place. You should be acquainted with the story in all its complicated details. But does the sermon itself need a history lesson of the royal family to speak of the messiness of family and the machinations of blood relations?

When we gather as God’s people for worship, our faces turn toward God. Our worship is an offering of selves, of words, of actions, of commitments, of confession and repentance, but all to God. God is the audience of our worship. But we also turn our gaze outward toward the created world, toward the people around us, and we lift up prayers for healing and hope, for transformation and grace. We ask God to intervene in situations we barely understand or with people we don’t know. Yet our prayers are earnest and faith-filled. We even offer ourselves as signs of God’s presence, God’s healing grace, and redemptive presence in the lives of those around us and the wider world. We call these prayers “the prayers of the people.” Sometimes we speak of intercession - prayers or actions on behalf of another. We care even without the history, even without the detail. Asking for prayer within the body doesn’t mean sharing everything. It is an invitation to exhibit grace for and with one another and with the world around us. We don’t need to stand in judgment over those who may have made bad choices, who may have come from dysfunctional families. We can extend grace and provide space for healing and for transformation to take place in safety.

David’s anguish over the fate of his son is genuine, even though this son had opposed him as king. Even though the family had been torn apart by behaviors and selfishness and raging egos, David still wanted to love his wayward son. He wanted to love him into a new way of being in the world. Now it was too late. Perhaps a part of David’s pain was realizing how he had failed his son. What parent doesn’t face such a loss without feeling somehow responsible for all that happened? As a preacher, you stand before families who might not have such epic levels of dysfunction but are nonetheless covering wounds of which you might have only an inkling. In telling the story in our text for this week, we can bring a measure of hope to those who may have felt like all is lost—not that there are solutions that can come from the pulpit. That is a matter for counselors and a lot of intense work on family dynamics. But there can come an offer of grace; there can be an invitation to lead with love, maybe even a call to hold on … to one another or to hope or to the God who loves us like a parent and whose heart breaks when we hurt.

Let our prayers – and our preaching – be a true intercession— prayers of the people who cry out to God and cling to hope.