

2 Samuel 18:5-9, 15, 31-33
Psalm 130
Ephesians 4:25-5:2
John 6:35, 41-51

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The Rev. Karen Haig

Bread and the Bread of Life

Sometimes it seems like just when we think things can't get any worse... somehow, they get worse. For a minute there, it looked like David got away with slaughtering his most faithful soldier and taking possession of that soldier's grieving wife. For a minute there, all the politics of that world – a world where women were something akin to property without any agency at all, and men, especially powerful men, could snap their fingers and make virtually anything they wanted to have happen, happen – all those politics came into play and I imagine David was thinking he had it made.

But no. Today, it's all coming apart. As it turns out, David's life was utterly destroyed – oh he didn't die, but the people he loved did. David's self-absorbed behavior set off a chain of events that mercifully, we don't hear in church, but it's right there in that same book we're reading from today. David suffered the death of an infant son, the rape of his daughter by his son, the death of that son at the hands of his favorite son and on and on it goes. And it did look like he'd gotten away with killing Uriah so he could have Bathsheba. But he didn't. David was living in the hell of his own making.

It can be tempting to think all the terrible things that happened to David were God's punishment for his bad behavior. But we have to be careful with that sort of thinking. That's the sort of thinking that says starvation has decimated whole populations in Africa because God is punishing black people. Or that people who are poor deserve to be poor because poor people are lazy and God punishes lazy people. Or that women who dress a certain way deserve to be assaulted by men because God says they're asking for it. Do you see what I mean? Imagining we know what God knows is a dicey proposition, and most always sends us down a very slippery slope. So rather than imposing our human limitations on the mind of God, let's find another way.

What we can say is that there were some very natural repercussions for David's bad behavior. He thought he could have, or take, whatever his heart desired. But David's heart had tender places too. He loved his children and was devastated by the death of his beloved son Absalom. It's complicated. David's story, while it isn't exactly our story, is somehow like every one of our stories - messy and complicated, and filled with every sort of emotion. But like our stories, David's story is ultimately filled with God's redemption too. God does redeem everything in the end, but we can't experience that redemption, if we choose (as David chose) to live our lives in service of ourselves. When we do that, we too find ourselves in the hell of our own making.

We've been hearing about this over these last few weeks in the letter to the Ephesians too, a letter that could just as well have been written to our church today. In that letter, we're reminded that, each one of us has been uniquely gifted by God and we ought to delight in those

gifts and be grateful for them. But we have to remember that our gifts were given to us by the God who loves us, not for our own pleasure, but for the life of the world. Neither David's gifts nor our gifts were given so that we as individuals become successful or wealthy or even virtuous or holy. God gave us our unique gifts solely for the sake of God's kingdom. They are not to be used in service to ourselves. They are to be used to bring God's kingdom to bear. I think King David missed that.

Lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, we hear in Ephesians. David had certainly been called. Do you remember the story? The Lord sent the prophet Samuel to Bethlehem, the place that would later be called the city of David, the place where Jesus would be born. When Samuel arrived at the house of Jesse, all but the youngest of Jesse's sons were there. One by one God rejected each one of the older, presumably wiser and more well-suited sons. When finally young David was called out of the fields and away from his sheep, he was chosen and anointed by God. Being called by God doesn't get any clearer than that. And in the beginning, David did lead a life worthy of the calling to which he'd been called. A life of humility, gentleness, and patience, a life without falsehood. Evil did not come out of his mouth and he used his gifts, all of them, to build up God's people. But something went terribly wrong. Was it killing Goliath that gave him his first taste for blood? Was it Saul's attempt on his life that roused David's warring spirit? Was it the death of his beloved friend Jonathan that turned his heart to stone? Something, somewhere went terribly wrong, and the beautiful, faithful, trustworthy and strong young David turned from God and became a slave to his own selfish desires. And as you know so well, David grew into a man who would do anything or kill anyone – even his most devoted follower - to get what he wanted.

It happens, doesn't it? We've seen it in our own lives, in our families, in our society. Some sort of hurt, some sort of loss, some sort of heartbreak happens, and a beautiful soul is lost. People don't usually turn ugly, entitled, self-absorbed, critical or cruel unless they have been hurt. Unless something has gone very wrong in their bodies, minds or spirits. Unless the longing in their souls cannot be met. Jesus knew about that. I think that's why he's gone on about bread and the bread of life for three weeks now and why he'll go on for two weeks more. God knows that we all have a deep longing, a deep hunger in us, whether it be for bread or the bread of life. When Jesus fed those multitudes, he knew that they hungered for more than food to fill their empty stomachs. He knew they longed for something that would fill their empty lives. But Jesus also knew that hungry people, people who really and truly have no idea where their next meal will come from, can't hear anything more than the rumbling in their bellies until they're fed. And so he fed them, with real bread and real fish, and when they had eaten their fill and had all they could ever want, only then did he begin to teach them about the bread that offers eternal life. While it is true that humankind cannot live by bread alone, we cannot live without it either. It matters that this is where Jesus started. It matters because making sure everyone had enough to fill their bellies was that first essential step in helping them to see what it might mean to feed on him in their hearts.

There is bread and there is the bread of life. And they can no more be separated than our flesh can be separated from our spirits. It's important not to miss that, not to value spiritual things more than we value fleshy, physical things. Because when we put all of our attention on spiritual things and leave off attending to the fleshy, physical things, it is easy to forget that there is great injustice and inequality in our world. When we put all of our attention on "spiritual things," it makes it easy to forget that while there is more than enough food on the planet to feed everyone, there are hungry people everywhere. We need to pay attention to flesh and blood life so we don't forget that one out of every seven people in our world is hungry. We need to pay attention so we can take in the reality that on this very day, nearly 9,000 children will die from hunger-related illness. That's one beloved little person, every 10 seconds.¹

There is bread and there is the bread of life. And while such tangible, physical hunger persists in our world, there are those who stuff themselves to overflowing and still find themselves constantly craving, constantly consuming, trying in vain to fill the emptiness inside themselves. It's a spiritual hunger just as devastating as any physical hunger has ever been. But unlike the ones who are hungry for bread, these constant consumers have no idea what they are starving for. So they consume everything in sight, using vast amounts of time, money and resources trying to satisfy themselves, but finding no satisfaction in the stuff they stuff themselves with. They aren't starving for stuff, they're starving for connection, for relationship, for forgiveness, for love. What would the world be like if the consumers, the ones with the resources, the ones who were starving for love, used their resources to feed the ones who were starving for food? What would the world be like if the ones with the bread offered bread, and in the very act of offering, received the bread of life? I think Jesus fed the people bread before he fed them the bread of life because he needed them to know, just as he needs us to know, that the two are inseparable.

There is bread and there is the bread of life. While we sometimes forget that flesh and spirit go together, Jesus never forgot. He fed the people bread, and in that miracle, showed us what would happen if only we would feed on him. This is my body. This is my blood. There is bread and there is the bread of life. Both are yours for the taking right here at this table. Both are offered by the God who loves you and wants to live in you so that you will want for nothing and be filled to overflowing. When you come to be fed at this table today, when you eat the bread and drink the wine, know that what you are taking in is both life sustaining bread and Jesus, the life-giving bread of life. Because when we take that in, we will find ourselves filled to overflowing, so that there is nothing to do but offer what we have been given – both bread and the bread of life. Amen

¹ <https://www.theworldcounts.com/challenges/people-and-poverty/hunger-and-obesity/how-many-people-die-from-hunger-each-year>