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August 27th: 2 Samuel 14 & Colossians 2:20—3:11

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The return of Absalom. Put your mind on things above!

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

2 Samuel 14—Now Joab the son of Zeruiah knew that the king's heart went out to Absalom. And Joab sent to Tekoa, and brought from there a wise woman, and said to her, Pretend to be a mourner, and put on mourning garments. Do not anoint yourself with oil, but behave like a woman who has been mourning many days for the dead.

Go to the king, and speak thus to him. So Joab put the words in her mouth. When the woman of Tekoa came to the king, she fell on her face to the ground, and paid homage, and said, Save me, O king.

And the king said to her, What is your trouble? She answered, Alas, I am a widow, my husband is dead, and your servant had two sons. And they quarrelled with one another in the field. There was no one to separate them, and one struck the other and killed him.

And now the whole clan has risen against your servant, and they say, Give up the man

who struck his brother, that we may put him to death for the life of his brother whom he killed. And so they would destroy the heir also. Thus they would quench my cold that is left, and leave to my husband neither name nor remnant on the face of the earth.

Then the king said to the woman, Go to your house, and I will give orders concerning you. And the woman of Tekoa said to the king, On me be the guilt, my lord the king, and on my father's house. Let the king and his throne be guiltless.

The king said, If anyone says anything to you, bring him to me, and he shall never touch you again. Then she said, Please let the king invoke the lord your god, that the avenger of blood kill no more, and my son be not destroyed. He said, As the lord lives, not one hair of your son shall fall to the ground.

Then the woman said, Please let your servant speak a word to my lord the king. He said, Speak. And the woman said, Why then have you planned such a thing against the people of god? For in giving this decision, the king convicts himself inasmuch as the king does not bring his banished one home again.

We must all die. We are like water spilled on the ground, which cannot be gathered up again. But god will not take away life, and he devises means so that the banished one will not remain an outcast.

Now I have come to say this to my lord the king, because the people have made me afraid. And your servant thought, I will speak to the king. It may be that the king will perform the request of his servant.

For the king will hear and deliver his servant from the hand of the man who would destroy me and my son together from the heritage of god. And your servant thought, The word of my lord the king will set me at rest. For my lord the king is like the angel of god to discern good and evil.

The lord your god be with you. Then the king answered the woman, Do not hide from me anything I ask you. And the woman said, Let my lord the king speak.

The king said, Is the hand of Joab with you in all this? The woman answered and said, As surely as you live, my lord the king, one cannot turn to the right hand or to the left from anything that my lord the king has said. It was your servant Joab who commanded me. It was he who put all these words in the mouth of your servant.

In order to change the course of things your servant Joab did this. But my lord has wisdom like the wisdom of the angel of god to know all things that are on the earth. Then the king said to Joab, Behold now I grant this, go bring back the young man Absalom.

And Joab fell on his face to the ground and paid homage and blessed the king. And Joab said, Today your servant knows that I have found favour in your sight, my lord the king,

in that the king has granted the request of his servant. So Joab arose and went to Geshur and brought Absalom to Jerusalem.

And the king said, Let him dwell apart in his own house, he is not to come into my presence. So Absalom lived apart in his own house and did not come into the king's presence. Now in all Israel there was no one so much to be praised for his handsome appearance as Absalom.

From the sole of his foot to the crown of his head there was no blemish in him. And when he cut the hair of his head, for at the end of every year he used to cut it, when it was heavy on him he cut it, he weighed the hair of his head, two hundred shekels by the king's weight. There were born to Absalom three sons and one daughter whose name was Tamar.

She was a beautiful woman. So Absalom lived two full years in Jerusalem without coming into the king's presence. Then Absalom sent for Joab to send him to the king, but Joab would not come to him.

And he sent a second time, but Joab would not come. Then he said to his servants, See, Joab's field is next to mine, and he has barley there. Go and set it on fire.

So Absalom's servants set the field on fire. Then Joab arose and went to Absalom at his house and said to him, Why have your servants set my field on fire? Absalom answered Joab, Behold, I sent word to you, come here, that I may send you to the king to ask, Why have I come from Geshur? It would be better for me to be there still. Now therefore let me go into the presence of the king, and if there is guilt in me, let me be put to death.

Then Joab went to the king and told him, and he summoned Absalom. So he came to the king and bowed himself on his face to the ground before the king, and the king kissed Absalom. In 2 Samuel chapter 14, five years after the rape of Tamar and three years after the exile of Absalom, Joab decides to intervene.

Absalom had killed Amnon the crown prince after he had raped his sister Tamar, and rather than Absalom being put to death, he went out into exile, staying with Ptolemy the king of Geshur, his grandfather. David failed to act against Amnon after he raped his sister, and now he fails to act effectively in Absalom's case. This failure to act in situations that call for decisive action will be a characteristic of David's later years as king.

After David's sin with Bathsheba, he is weak and passive and ineffectual, and into the power vacuum that he leaves, step people like Joab and Absalom. Much as Abner was the man pulling the strings behind the throne of the weak Ish-bosheth, so Joab is the one who pulls the strings behind David's throne. David's failure to act decisively at this point is a matter of incredible severity.

The crown prince Amnon has been killed, and the one who might be next in line, Absalom, is the one who murdered him and is now in exile. David's strength and his powers of judgement are clearly failing him, and the question of succession is pressing itself quite keenly upon the minds of the people, but yet there is this situation of uncertainty, where the true successor has not actually been marked out. While the reader knows that the true successor is supposed to be Solomon, that is not clear to everyone else in the nation, and Joab in particular does not seem to want to have Solomon as the heir.

Joab has always been a man of real politics, a strong man who is concerned with pragmatism and power over morality, and seeing this growing power vacuum and David's passivity, he recognises the threat that this poses to the nation. Joab also has a great deal of leverage with David on account of his knowledge of David's sin with Bathsheba and Uriah. We should bear in mind here that David's weakness is not merely as a result of his failing strength through old age.

He has placed himself in a morally weak position relative to Joab, and also relative to Absalom. He was made complicit in the rape of Tamar his daughter by Amnon, who had followed his father's example in the way that he had treated Bathsheba, and gone even further with his rape of Tamar. Absalom in killing Amnon also made David complicit in his action, and once again was following his father's example of murder.

David had arranged the murder of Uriah, now Absalom arranged the murder of Amnon. On account of both his own sins and his complicity in the sins of his sons, David was unable to judge effectively, and so he ends up being passive. Furthermore, because of Joab's involvement in David's own sin, Joab has great power over David, and David can't rule effectively in his case.

David's weakness and his inability to hold on to his kingdom is in many ways a loss of his power to exercise judgement on account of his own sin. Like some vast arrangement of dominoes, David's first fateful action sets off a cascade that leads to a collapse of stupendous proportions, and that is even though some of the damage is averted on account of his repentance and forgiveness. At this point, David himself and his capacity to run his administration are a shadow of what they once were.

Here there is another confrontation with David in the form of a parable, this time orchestrated by the serpent in David's garden, Joab. Instructed by Joab, the wise woman of Tekoa tells a story of two sons, who fought in a field, one slaying the other. As a result of this situation, the murderer is going to be killed, and the woman, who is a widow, is going to be left without any son to carry on her name.

The choice here is between the avenger of blood and not cutting off the name of the deceased husband. The son who killed his brother is presented as having committed manslaughter in a fight that got out of hand, not committing premeditated murder. This

we should observe reminds us of two previous events in the preceding chapters.

First of all, the parable of Nathan that Nathan gives to David, a parable that leads him to repentance, and which exposes the character of the situation. And then in chapter 13, the way that Jonadab, the crafty man who like Joab is a nephew of David, puts words in someone else's mouth with an ulterior motive. Here, even though David recognises that it is Joab behind the wise woman of Tekoa, he goes along with Joab.

He can't resist Joab at this point, he has lost both the moral authority and the actual power to stand in Joab's way. Having presented her concern that the murderer was going to be killed by the avenger of blood, and that her husband's name and her life would be thoroughly extinguished, the woman pleads for the life of the remaining son to be spared. And David rules in favour of her plea, but then she springs the trap of the parable.

He is the man, as it were. The widow was Israel, and the son for whose life she pleaded was Absalom. There are various echoes of Eden here.

Joab was a snake in the garden of David's house, a shrewd and vicious operator who was one of the most insidious threats to David and the integrity of his kingdom. He made David complicit in his wickedness. And David himself, by entrusting Joab with the execution of his plot against Uriah, had given Joab this leverage over him.

Employing deception, the serpent Joab used a woman to get David, the new Adam, to capitulate. The woman's account of her two sons closely parallels the story of Cain and Abel in Genesis chapter 4, and the woman was implicitly aligning herself with Eve. Significantly, just as she springs the trap of the parable, she speaks of the discerning of good and evil in verse 17, recalling the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the garden.

David hearkened to the voice of the woman and to the voice of the snake behind her. Absalom was brought back to Jerusalem. Perhaps David also heard a faint whisper of his own sin within the woman's parable.

Why did Cain kill Abel? Because he was envious of God's pleasure in the firstlings of Abel's flock. But as the parable of Nathan had revealed, David has slain Uriah for his new lamb. We should also consider the logic of the parable.

The logic of the parable is quite insidious. First of all, it presents the woman as a widow. But yet Israel has a husband, David.

David is still on the throne. He has not yet died. Unless perhaps we are to recognize that David is so ineffectual at this point that he might as well have died, the vacuum that he has left in his failure to act and appoint a clear successor to himself is causing a crisis of succession.

Israel feels that it is bereaved, but it does not know who to look to to carry on the name. We might also observe that even though David was spared from death by the Lord, after his sin with Bathsheba, his life is characterized by inaction, mourning, powerlessness and his approaching death. David allows Absalom to return to Jerusalem, but not to enter his presence.

This doesn't make things any better. Absalom is not clearly set up as the successor to David, but neither is he condemned nor exiled. At this point Absalom is described to us.

Absalom is remarkably handsome. He is someone who stands out from everyone in Israel. Just as Saul did, being head and shoulders above everyone else, and as David did on account of his beautiful appearance.

Here is a man who seems set apart for rule. The feature of Absalom that particularly marks him is his hair. Later this will prove to be important for the narrative, but here it also has significance in other respects.

Absalom's hair is weighty. It's cut once a year and it's weighed. Weighed using a measure that is also used for the wool of sheep.

Geoffrey Gagin observes the significance of this in Absalom's case. Absalom had executed revenge upon his brother Amnon for the rape of Tamar at the time of the sheep shearing festival in the preceding chapter. Elsewhere in the Old Testament we see the importance of the sheep shearing festival for the house of Judah, David and the house of Jacob.

Jacob leaves Laban at the time of sheep shearing. Judah sleeps with Tamar at the time of sheep shearing. David is opposed by Nabal at the time of sheep shearing.

And now Absalom, David's son, is personally associated with the time of sheep shearing. He is like a sheep that is shorn at that time of the year. Absalom has three sons and a daughter called Tamar.

Absalom's beautiful daughter called Tamar clearly reminds us of Absalom's beautiful sister called Tamar and of the wrong that was committed to her. The fact that the text gives us her name and not the name of her brothers would suggest that her name is of narrative significance. A man with three sons and a daughter called Tamar would also remind us perhaps of Judah.

Judah had three sons and a daughter-in-law called Tamar. Absalom reminds us of David and even more so as he wins over the hearts of the people in the following chapter. He reminds us of Judah, the head of the kingly tribe, and he has various other auspicious features that mark him out as a kingly character.

Perhaps we might also see some resemblances to the character of Samson, another man

who is characterized by the weight of his hair and who burns fields of grain. Absalom, though he is back in the city of Jerusalem, is clearly not in his father's good graces and is not allowed into his father's presence. He is not satisfied with this position so he appeals to Joab to act in his case but Joab won't respond.

He sends a second time and Joab won't respond and so he burns Joab's fields with fire. Joab, who brought Absalom back, has his fields burnt up by him. This anticipates what will happen to the whole field of Israel as a result of Absalom's return.

Absalom is engaging in some real political brinkmanship here, showing some virility that David completely lacks at this point. If David won't make a decision in his case, he will force the decision upon David, giving him the ultimatum, either kill or completely expel him from the land or return him to his good favour. Joab brings the message to the king and Absalom is restored.

A question to consider. How in this chapter and the chapters that precede it do we see David losing his powers of judgement after his sins concerning Bathsheba and Uriah? Colossians 2.20-3.11 If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations? Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch, referring to things that all perish as they are used, according to human precepts and teachings. These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.

If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

Put to death therefore what is earthly in you, sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming. In these you too once walked, when you were living in them, but now you must put them all away, anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth.

Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices, and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free, but Christ is all, and in all. In Colossians chapter 2 Paul has been highlighting the futility of turning back to the elementary principles and powers of the old age of the flesh, now that Christ has come, with all the fullness of deity and the substance of what was once foreshadowed.

Now he drives home the point to the Colossians, underlining the practical import of this reality. Death releases us from the powers and the principles that once governed us in

the realm where we formerly lived. However, even having been freed from these principles and powers, the Colossians were in danger of returning to live in terms of them, as if they were still governed by them.

Paul isn't necessarily accusing the Colossians of having done this, but he wants them to be exceedingly alert to the reality of the danger. The danger is that they will subject themselves to ascetic regulations, do not handle, do not taste, do not touch, as if these were what true religion is about. Such regulations were prominent features of the Judaism to which Judaizing missionaries might be tempting the Colossians.

However, all of these regulations are narrowly focused on material objects, and they arise from human traditions. While they may sound wise, like a true form of religion, they are really characteristic of a religion of human invention, that imposes harsh treatment upon the body, but is ultimately futile in dealing with the true problem of the flesh and preventing its indulgence. It doesn't deal with the problem of the heart at the root of the fleshly condition.

We should recall Jesus' teaching from Mark 7, verses 18-23, with which Paul's teaching clearly has a very great deal in common. And he said to them, Then are you also without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, since it enters not his heart, but his stomach, and is expelled? Thus he declared all foods clean. And he said, What comes out of a person is what defiles him.

For from within, out of the heart of man, comes evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person. The form of the most likely Jewish ascetic religion that Paul is challenging in his teaching to the Colossians actually has much in common with pagan religion, with its shared preoccupation with the flesh, yet inability to tackle its underlying heart issue.

True and faithful religion has a rather different character to it, and Paul goes on to discuss what this alternative pattern of practice must look like. The truth at the heart of a true pattern of Christian religion is the resurrection of Christ and our participation in it by the Spirit. We belong to a different realm of existence having undergone a translation into a new sphere of transformed life.

We must live in terms of the freedom that this affords us. The new pattern of religion is founded upon the achieved fact of our participation in the resurrection of Christ, not some attempt to achieve resurrection for ourselves. Our death and resurrection is a fact for Christians, a fact that must be the fundamental truth of our existence.

Our lives are now situated with Christ and God, and the full reality of our lives awaits us in the day of the revelation of Christ. Our current existence must be lived in anticipation of this, a living out of the reality-filled promise of what we will one day be. Behind all of

this is the question of the real me.

Who am I really? Paul wants the Colossians, and us, to answer this by pointing to Christ and declaring that our lives are hidden in him. And there is a real hiddenness here. We do not generally appear righteous, whether to ourselves or to others.

We are all too aware of our own sinfulness and failings. Yet we have died, and will be raised with Christ. This is something that is sealed to us in our baptisms.

We must live by faith in this promise, constantly declaring to ourselves the deep truth of our existence, against all of the appearances. We must constantly return to God's word about our true existence and live in terms of it. Our true life is part of the mystery of Christ, a mystery largely hidden from the world, but gloriously revealed to God's people.

God is like the sculptor standing in front of us as his blocks of marble, declaring that we are glorious images of his Son. To most eyes, of course, we simply look like great blocks of marble, bearing no clearly discernible form. However, the sculptor's word is an assurance that the reality of our existence is not defined by what we currently appear to be, but by what we are being fashioned into.

Paul wants us to think of ourselves in this way. We are not primarily the unhewn block, but that glorious image waiting to be revealed by the work of the master sculptor upon us. Thinking of ourselves in such a manner, we will identify and act very differently.

We will see a great deal in ourselves that doesn't belong to what we are to become. Rather, it is destined to become chippings and rubble, those parts that are to be removed from the marble block to release the glorious sculpture now trapped by them within it. We may define ourselves, by certain of our sins, obstinately resistant to the chisel of the sculptor that would seek to strip us of them.

These things, however, are earthly, they are marked out for divine wrath. No matter how attached we may currently be to these things, they imprison us, and if we will not be freed from them, they mark us out for destruction too. Paul especially foregrounds sexual immorality and the sinful desires, passions and lusts that underlie it.

Such sexual sins and lusts are often particularly emphasised by Paul, perhaps because they most readily become defining a people's existence and identity. Behind all such sins, however, lurks covetousness, the greed that so commonly drives us, and behind that, the monster of idolatry itself, by which we devote our lives to the service of something other than the true God, and fashion false masters in our own perverted image. Our lives were once defined by such sins and practices.

Indeed, these were the air we breathed, the water we swam in, and the realm we inhabited. They were our manner of life, the things that we set our minds upon, our preoccupation and our governing concerns. However, now we must shed them all like an

old skin.

If Paul's list of vices in verse 5 foregrounded sexual sins, in verse 8 he foregrounds sins of the mouth, which are often so prominently condemned in the scripture. Again, we should recall our Lord's teaching concerning true impurity in Matthew chapter 15 verses 17-18. Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and is expelled? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person.

Christians must trace the problem back to the root, through the mouth and down into the heart. As N.T. Wright observes, the old form of religion went after symptoms, but the new form goes for the root. The new humanity in Christ that Paul is speaking about is not an individualistic reality.

It's a new body of people who are renewed, not merely as detached persons, but in a restored and transformed society. The old self of the flesh is the old forms of society that we were once embedded in, forms of society governed by vicious speech, by lies, and by the biting and devouring of each other that is characteristic of speech in such society and the flesh. We have left behind these old solidarities, again something symbolically manifest in our baptisms.

The new humanity into which we are placed is being renovated and renewed in the image of its creator, made into what God always intended for humanity to be. In the body of Christ, humanity is rising to its true and proper stature, no longer stunted and distorted by sin. We are being renewed into knowledge, brought to a true recognition of our creator, of what we are as his images, and of what everything else is in the light of his being, truth and glory.

In this new humanity, the differences, oppositions and antagonisms and tensions that characterise life in the flesh, the differences between the various families and social classes of humanity, are abolished, as all divisions are traversed by the unifying spirit of Christ that fills all, placing every human being, whatever their fleshly identity or background, upon the same firm footing of the broad sunlit uplands of God's glorious grace. A question to consider. Here, as in related passages such as Ephesians chapter 4, Paul gives special attention to the importance of a renewed way of speaking.

What are some of the ways in which Christians should and can stand out from others by their manner of speaking and their forms of conversation as a society? What are some specific ways that we can put off the old self and put on the new self in this regard, in the situations within which we find ourselves?