
Hanging Between Heaven and Earth

“Absalom was riding on his mule, and the mule went under the thick branches of a great oak. His head caught fast in the oak, and he was left hanging between heaven and earth...” 2 Samuel 18:9

Three weeks ago Margaret Ann and I were blessed by the birth of our second son, Cyrus Bond Marsh. The love I have for our children makes it painful for me (and any parent) to hear David’s lament: “O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I have died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!”

Seeing as though I am sleep deprived and there are a lot of father-son issues going on in this text, today’s sermon will focus on three questions:

1. Why is Absalom hanging in a tree?
2. Are we hanging in that tree with Absalom?
3. Where is God in all of this?

First, why is Absalom hanging in a tree?

The story of Absalom occurs in 2 Samuel 13-18, and there are valid reasons the lectionary skips over it and Godly Play doesn’t cover it at all. If you are a fan of Southern Literature you know William Faulkner wrote a book titled, “Absalom, Absalom.” And if you are familiar with Faulkner, that should tell you something about this biblical story!

In 2 Samuel 13, Absalom’s brother, Amnon, rapes his sister, Tamar. Absalom is furious that King David, his father, doesn’t punish Amnon, so Absalom kills Amnon and goes into exile for three years. Absalom returns to Jerusalem and two years pass before he sees his father.

After 5 years, Absalom wants to see his father, so he sends for Joab, one of David’s chief officers. Joab never shows up, so Absalom sends for Joab a second time. Again, Joab never shows up. Absalom is too proud to ask a third time, so he sets Joab’s crops on fire. Maybe that will get Joab’s attention.

Sure enough Joab shows up and relays the message to King David, who calls for his son.

The scripture says when Absalom sees his father, he prostrates himself before the King and David showers his son with kisses. It is a beautiful reconciliation, but the story takes a turn for the worse.

Having reconciled with his father, Absalom decides to position himself to become King. He acquires horses and chariots and storms into Hebron and becomes their king. Shortly thereafter, he starts setting his eyes on Jerusalem. Absalom’s army forces David to flee Jerusalem, and when Absalom enters the city, he decides to display his power and humiliate his father.

What he does next is horrible: In 2 Samuel 16, Absalom pitches a tent outside of his father’s house and proceeds to rape David’s concubines in the sight of all of Israel. This war between father and son has gotten personal and violent, yet David has one request: “Deal gently for my sake with the young man Absalom.”

And then it happened. As Absalom was riding to meet David’s servants his mule took him under an oak and that beautiful hair (that he would cut and sell for money) got caught in the branches, and that is why Absalom is hanging in a tree.

Now to my second question: Are we hanging in that tree with Absalom?

Absalom is hanging in that tree because of his pride and a series of poor decisions. As my Grandmother Jan would say, “Absalom has made the bed he now has to sleep in.”

I don’t know about you, but pride has certainly gotten the best of me. Furthermore, I am guilty of making poor decisions and creating unnecessary conflicts. There is a special name for this disorder—it is called “being human.”

Pride, poor decisions, and conflict are at the heart of our human nature.

That is why a prominent business school professor tells his students that one of the most important things they can do is get up on the balcony (metaphorically speaking).

He tells them to get up on the balcony so they can see what is happening below; but more importantly, on the balcony, you get to see how your pride and behavior are impacting the lives of others.

According to that business school professor, we all need to be in that tree with Absalom.

And that brings me to my third and final question: Where is God in all of this?

If Absalom is hanging in the tree and we are there with him, where is God? Will God rescue us or will we perish, like Absalom?

God will not rescue us...nor will God allow us to perish. Instead, God does the unthinkable. Christ enters this world and hangs upon a tree!

Yes, the most prominent image of our faith is the crucified Christ hanging on the cross. The cross reminds us that our pride and poor decisions are destructive, as evidenced by Jesus’ death.

Here is the good news: Like Absalom, we deserve to be in that tree, but Christ chooses to hang in our place.

And here is where it gets interesting: As Christians, Christ calls us to hang with him. St. Paul understood this when he wrote, “I want to be crucified with Christ.”

Why does Paul write those words? Because when we are united with Christ, we are united with Christ on the cross.

And when we are united with Christ on the cross, we see the world through God’s eyes, we witness God’s unconditional love, and we begin to acknowledge the mess that we have created.

But there is even better news: When we are united with Christ on the cross we hang between heaven and earth. Celtic Spirituality calls this ambiguous space a “thin place.”

When we spend time in prayer, when we come to the table for Eucharist, we are united with Christ on the cross. We experience hope, new life, and a love greater than anything we can comprehend.

So, where is God in all of this? God calls us to the tree. God calls us to enter that space between heaven and earth—to see Absalom, to see ourselves, and to see Jesus Christ. All that we are...and all that we are called to be...is on that tree... hanging between heaven and earth!