

***Caught Between Heaven and Earth***

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**2 Samuel 18: 5-9, 15, 31-33 (NRSV)**

Good morning. First of all, a huge thank you to all our lay preachers this summer as well as to Will and Maeve who deliver such incredible messages throughout the year. Our church is truly blessed to receive such rich food for thought. And thank you to Maeve for reading what may be two rather challenging passages today, with some difficult concepts and images – this rather gruesome passage in 2 Samuel about Absalom, the favored son of King David, and in John, Jesus describing himself as the bread of life and that whoever eats the bread and believes will have eternal life. This was the lectionary reading for today, along with 4 other passages. I like to preach from the assigned lectionary; I like the challenge in that. I have to admit though when I first read these two selections we heard this morning, I did pause.... pretty sure I didn't hear this story of Absalom in Sunday school or Vacation Bible School. And as my sister said, You know, Laurie, you don't have to preach from either of these scriptures today – there were 4 other readings I could have chosen, but I found I could not get the image of poor Absalom and his demise out of my head. And there was that phrase "hanging between heaven and earth." There was something in that image and that phrase that spoke to me, and I thought it might be worth exploring. A disclaimer, however. I don't claim to have any answers, just some observations and perhaps some questions.

First, a little background on the Lectionary and this young man, Absalom.

The Revised Common Lectionary that our church and many other Protestant churches use organizes the scripture readings for each Sunday by season. We are currently in the Season After Pentecost – that event that occurred 50 days after the resurrection of Jesus when the Holy Spirit descends upon the disciples. It's a long season; it runs from sometime in May to Advent in late November or early December. In the Catholic Church, this season is called Ordinary Time, not because it's ordinary or that it isn't special or significant but because it's based on the Latin word for order. The time between Advent and Pentecost focuses primarily on the life of Jesus. This time after Pentecost or Ordinary Time focuses more on us on followers of Jesus and what we are called to do in Jesus' absence; how we are to order our lives to the life of Christ. As I read the 6 passages selected for today, they all had something to say about what is required of us to model our lives after Christ. There is a reading from 1 Kings that Christiane preached from earlier this summer about Elijah in the desert, running from God and his ministry; how he falls asleep exhausted and despairing. And how the angel of the Lord visits him and encourages him to eat so that he may continue his journey and his work ahead. We have a reading from Psalms about how we need to wait for God and another passage from Psalms about how we should bless and praise God. And then there's Paul's letter to the people of Ephesus where he instructs them to speak no evil, to put aside anger, to be kind, to be imitators of God and to walk in love. However, I didn't quite see the connection in the passage in 2 Samuel, except perhaps that all these passages speak also about the nature of God and that maybe David's love and grief over his son could be compared to God's love for us and his grief when we are lost like Absalom.

So, who was Absalom. He was the third and supposedly favorite of David's first 3 sons, all born to different women. His name, ironically, means 'father of peace.' An unlikely moniker given

the path in life that he had chosen. He was supposedly a very handsome man with a beautiful head of hair about which he was quite vain. In one account I read, he would only cut his hair once a year when it got too heavy. He was charming and well liked by most people. But he was also a very angry, impatient and ambitious young man. His sister Tamar had been raped by the oldest half-brother, Amnon, and when after 3 years, David had done nothing to punish him, Absalom took his own revenge and had Amnon killed. He then fled the country and eventually began plotting to overthrow his father.

And here is where we find Absalom in today's reading – riding his mule to meet the army of David when his glorious mass of hair gets caught in the low hanging branches of a large oak tree. He's not dead, at least not yet. But there he is suspended between heaven and earth. Not heaven and hell but heaven and earth. I kept turning this phrase over and over in my head. It felt familiar. It seemed to trigger some memory in me, like I too had experienced the same fate as Absalom. And I wondered if this phrase seemed to be saying something about the human condition. Perhaps it is familiar to you as well? I also wondered if it didn't say something about what we believe or don't believe.

Now the word for heaven in Greek means sky, and for many people heaven is a place somewhere other than here, or they think it refers to an afterlife. Now I have never thought much about an afterlife, and I can't say that I believe in one. I do think about dying and am well aware that this body that I inhabit is finite. But more often when I think of heaven, it is aspirational, that is it is something we are aiming for and that it is meant to be realized here on

earth. But we are so often faced with the realization that the gap between the world that we hope for and the one we actually have seems to get wider and wider with time and feels insurmountable. And therein lies my question about belief: that perhaps it's not that we don't believe in heaven, but that we don't believe in this earth, in this world, in the possibility of heaven on earth.

In Hebrew, heaven means the place where God lives. For me this was a far more interesting and acceptable interpretation.

I have been reading a book by L. William Countryman entitled *Living on the Border of the Holy* and the author puts forth a theory that I find really interesting and I think speaks to what I am talking about today.

Countryman, an Anglican priest, suggests that priesthood (and we could substitute the word minister for priest) is a "fundamental and inescapable part of being human.... [that we all] knowingly or unknowingly minister as priests to one another." (3) [And] "by priest, [he means] any person who lives in the dangerous, exhilarating, life-giving borderlands of human existence, where the everyday experience of life opens up to reveal glimpses of the HOLY – and not only lives there but comes to the aid of others who are living there [as well]." (xi) The reference to a borderland is reminiscent of the Celtic concept of thin place – where the distance between heaven and earth is reduced. Where the presence of God seems more readily accessible. Places like Iona, off the coast of Scotland, or St. Peter's Basilica in Rome – these thin places may be a sacred building or a place in nature. My thin place of choice is the Bike Path in Arlington.

But it could also be anywhere that we seek to unearth the presence of God, where we encounter the hidden mystery of God. And as Countryman says, “[this] border country...turns out to be, paradoxically, our native land.” (p.6)

Another important thing to know about this borderland is, that according to Countryman, each of us has some unique access to what is hidden in the borderland – some secret knowledge of God. He refers to this secret knowledge as *arcana*, which in Latin means secret. It’s as if each of us is a single and unique piece of the puzzle of humanity, of the Kingdom of God. The puzzle would not be complete without your piece of the puzzle. We are meant to share what we know, what we learn; we are meant to share our bit of secret knowledge with each other, to complete the puzzle. I also wonder when we inhabit this borderland if in addition to unearthing the Holy, we are also unearthing ourselves – the selves God created us to be. Unearthing the bits and pieces of ourselves that we may have jettisoned along the way; the bits and pieces that need to be re-discovered and reclaimed and shared.

But all too often we find ourselves far removed from this borderland and from God and ourselves. Instead we find ourselves hanging between heaven and earth, rendered rudderless, struggling to hope. How do we hope? How do we practice becoming and being priests?

Countryman says, “The first objective, for all of us, is not to seek some radically new life, but to pay attention to the life in which we find ourselves.... We may be called at some point to [a new place and a new life], but for most of us, most of the time, our priesthood simply calls us deeper within our present life, not away from it.” (p.177). So first and foremost, we need to pay attention. We need to zoom in rather than zoom out.

Our priesthood is not a given. It takes practice. So how do we practice? In Barbara Brown Taylor's lovely little book, *An Altar in the World*, she lays out 12 practices that she has learned from her experience, her bits of arcana, that she offers in order to teach us how to be more fully human in this world. There's the practice of Waking Up to God, the practice of Getting Lost, the practice of Living with Purpose, just to name a few. Taylor maintains that "[w]herever you are, you live in the world, which is just waiting for you to notice the holiness in it. So welcome to your own priesthood, practice at the altar of your own life. The good news is that you have everything you need to begin." (xix).

If you think about it, all that we have learned this past year from Will and Maeve, from all of our summer preachers, like Eileen's asking us who is the Goliath in our lives, or Maggie telling us that each of us has a purpose, or Taylor telling us to don't just do something, sit there.

Everything we have heard this year is some piece of shared arcana – nourishment, meant to sustain us in our priesthood, food for the journey. As Teresa of Avila said "the whole way to heaven is heaven itself."

How else are we nourished for the journey ahead. We are nourished every time we gather around the table and take that small cube of bread in our hands and hear the words, "This is my body broken for you. Take and eat." We are being asked to ingest Christ. And hopefully, as the saying goes, we are what we eat. Amen