

St Barnabas Episcopal Church
The Ven, Douglas Edwards
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I have preaching sermons for 40 years. I have rarely wanted less to preach what I have prepared. I know that if I preached this sermon in many countries I would be thrown in jail. In China, Russia, Hungary, a half dozen African countries. But we are in America.

I was a child in the 60's and went to college in the 70's. These were turbulent times in our society. My youth was filled with bank bombings by the SLA, the Symbianese Liberation Army, which sought to overthrow the government through violence leading to a class war. The Compton race riots haunted/terrified me in my dreams. In high school I got in trouble with the administration for doing a survey of faculty and students as part of a school paper on the question: "Is homosexuality a social disease?" as it was characterized by the American Psychological Association at the time.

I had quite the row with my father when I invited a black girl home. His family heritage from Barbados was very racist. He changed his heart thanks to his children, wife and Archie Bunker...not in that order. I am proud of that change that would welcome a black man, a Pilipino, a Salvadoran, a lesbian, and even a Texan into our family.

My very conservative parish... {How conservative? Well, following the Summer of Love, our rector spoke to the youth of the parish. He warned against holding hands on a date because it could lead to immoral activities. Let me tell you, his daughter did not take his words to heart!} On his retirement, the pendulum swung for one extreme to the other. The parish called as Gary Adams as rector, a one-time Arizona assemblyman who brought with him a strong activist bent that was very liberal. You'd never guess it to see the man whom I loved dearly. When I confronted his liberalism one day, he told me, "I am not a liberal, I am a radical." I suppose that it is true. For our deeply republican congregation soon found itself opening a counseling center for men considering draft avoidance. We opened a food bank using old storage rooms.

When the neighboring Metropolitan Church, an openly gay and lesbian congregation, was burned to the ground by bigots, the Episcopal Church of the Messiah, my church, led the charge pulling together other mainline churches, equally conservative, to support the gay community. Almost immediately, our century old wooden church received fire bomb threats. I spent nights sleeping in the sanctuary to protect our Church, sometimes with a dearest friend, a Jew, other nights with a church member who came out of the closet as a gay man, creating quite the stir. He and I spent late night hours singing hymns we banged out on the basement piano. My youth group was led by a married couple. Unknown to me, he was an abusive husband suffering from PTSD related to his service in the Vietnam War. She would become one of the first women priests of the Church, entering seminary before women were allowed to be ordained. The Episcopal Church, known colloquially as the Republican Party at Prayer, had become woke, fully embracing the civil rights movement. In many Episcopal homes, these were unsettling, turbulent times.

Why this soliloquy on the turbulence of my youth? After all, we are not describing the killing fields of Cambodia.

Turbulence is part of the social dynamic, always present. Would anyone deny the turbulence of today that exists in pockets of America? What deserves our full attention is the lesson from 2 Samuel where we learn that society faces its most dangerous days when turbulence runs into AMBITION, and that is our word on the day, AMBITION.

The story of Absalom is a most cautionary tale.

Absalom was ambitious, and ambition is very dangerous for individuals and communities that have lost the core moral values of the Gospel. Absalom fomented a deadly civil war, used innuendo and violence to divide Israel, to wage an insurrection against his father, King David. He argued that the judicial system of the day was inadequate to meet the needs of the people because it was polluted by a King who ought not remain seated. He ranted and acted to undermined the authority of the government. He argued that he alone could fix it. Here's the quote, "If only I were the judge of the land! Then all who had a suit or cause might come to me, and I would give them justice."

Absalom invited all of his brothers to a feast at which they all got drunk. While in a stupor, per plan, the gracious host had his eldest half brother, Amnon, murdered for raping their half-sister, Tamar, two years earlier. This cleared away a competitor for the throne. **Ambition**, coupled with malice. Notably, Absalom had others commit the murder, but when the truth was announced he was force to flee to a kingdom with no extradition and waited for a pardon from his father. It came in 3 years. So he returned to Jerusalem not humbled, but triumphant, marching into the Capitol wearing fine attire and accompanied by 50 soldiers. This Secret Service detail accompanied Absalom wherever he went. No prodigal son, here. No, Absalom is ambition personified and wants power.

He is known for flattering his supplicants and earning their loyalty. He embarks on outrageously immoral deeds, having sex with multiple women of the King's concubine. His actions are political, not romantic. He wagers that the people will be impressed that he can behave above the law, that he is strong and certain of himself. Confident in his power-base, and filled by his poisonous ambition, Absalom makes the final breach four years after being allowed to return to Jerusalem, the City of Peace. He declares himself King and bids the people to remove his father, David, to install himself.

Why did Absalom do all this? Because his ambition was untampered by a personal moral compass.

How does it play in the land? Scripture says, **Absalom "stole the hearts of the people of Israel"**.

Absalom asks the people to join him in an insurrection. He gets huge numbers who are inspired by his audacity and his promise to return Israel to justice and greatness. He came so very close to taking the crown by force, but he fails. He is put down, killed in the insurrection's only battle.

The story goes that he was on a mule in full retreat from David's force under the command of Joab, who detested Absalom. Absalom's vanity for his hair proved his undoing as his long beautiful locks caught him in the thicket of an oak tree. Joab's soldiers found him dangling there... and killed him.

History does not look kindly upon Absalom. Rabbis would comment that what David could not do to his son, God and nature itself accomplished. As typifies would-be authoritarians once their day of demise arrives, his efforts became reviled in the land. Not for a week or a year, but for more than 1,000 years Jews, then Christians and Muslims, would throw stones at the grave of the ambitious man who chose sedition masked as a pursuit for justice. Parents would bring their children to the site just outside of Jerusalem to warn them about against ambition and rebelliousness. While Dante was penning his great Divine Comedy in the 14th Century, Rabbis were writing that in the deepest level of Hell lives Absalom. To this day, 2800 years ago, the man who "stole of hearts of Israel," Absalom, the third son of King David, remains one of the most despised persons in Jewish history

Ok, I am clearly offering a hit piece on this guy, but he seems to have earned it.

Today, in 2021 Absalom is largely a lost character to Christians. We have no replacement character to remind the faithful of the danger of ambition and sedition. Stalin, Hitler, Mussolini, Hideki Tojo are all Absalom, but they are largely inaccessible to us. We have consigned them as "one-offs" "unique aberrants" in the development of human governance. But I warn you: the threat of ambitious authoritarianism did not end with the invasion of Normandy. Each generation in every place spawns those who are willing to combine their unbridled ambition with tumult and risk social destruction. Each of these, man or woman, will harbor a magnetism capable of stealing the hearts of Israel during turbulent times. Each will be a wolf bearing a lovely picnic basket. Their moral compass does not point to True North, but only to their self-interest.

How will we know ambition we will see it, and how will be able to judge its moral character in our day?

Answer: We put our hand in the hand of the man who stilled the water, the man who calmed the turbulent sea. We seek after Jesus, the Bread of Life, for wisdom. We strive to do what Jesus would do. But we can only discern what Jesus would do if we study and reflect on his life, and ask that he infuse us with God's spirit. In words attributed to St. Augustine, Jesus is our Shepherd and we his sheep. But we are called to be smart sheep, not dumb sheep.

To see the world thru the eyes of another brings compassion. To see the world through the eyes of God brings holiness and a peace of heart that no external turbulence can disturb, and no ambition can steal.

I offer this sermon in gratitude to the US Capitol and DC Metropolitan police who died or suffered as a result of insurrection against our Congress and nation's Capitol. May their valor never be forgotten. May our hearts be ever given to Jesus, the Bread of Life.