

Text: I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in God's word I hope.

I would like to talk briefly about two odd misconceptions we have in our society. The first is regarding our expectation of happy endings as normal, and the other has to do with the bible. First, happy endings. Just last week Andrea and I went to see the latest Harry Potter movie. Its conclusion, or lack thereof (there is definitely going to be a sequel) reminded me of the brouhaha that was generated when the book that inspired this film was published. Apparently, it is not entirely a happy ending and some faithful readers were furious about that. They had followed the adventures of Harry and his cohorts for six previous books; they had become invested in the characters; they wanted a happy ending where all the beloved good guys win and all the vile bad guys get their just desserts. Although I will have to wait for the sequel know what other good guy is going to succumb to an evil wand, I know from watching this movie that it is sad to watch a well established character meet his end. The story did not have a happy ending. I realize that we have come, at least tacitly, to expect happy endings not only from movies, but from life in general, and we are mightily annoyed when it does not come out that way.

The second odd misconception that I'd like to mention is the idea that the Bible is a clean living book for clean living people, and that people, particularly children, must be protected from less tender reading. Some feel so strongly about this that many Christian groups work tirelessly to have certain books banned from public libraries and schools as unfit for children. Such books as *The Diary of Anne Frank*, *The Wizard of Oz*, Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time*, and of course Harry Potter are to be swept off the shelves because the message is not appropriate to pious ears in training. If kids want to read, let them read the Bible.

I thought of these two conceptions: happy endings and read-only-the-Bible, when I reread the entire story of David and Absalom in preparation for today's sermon. This morning we read the conclusion of the story: the ending of the civil war Absalom had started while trying to wrest the throne from his father, of Absalom's death and David's grief. I think it is important that we remember, as Paul Harvey was want to say, "the rest of the story," as told graphically in the Bible.

David, when he established his throne in Israel, did so with the vigor, strength and enthusiasm of youth. He could do no wrong, he was on top of the world: he slew Goliath, he conquered the Philistines, he forged Israel into the dominant power of the Mediterranean basin. The rightness of what he was doing seemed confirmed in the subsequent wealth and power he achieved for himself and the entire nation. He had a vision, he had a dream, and he saw it through. The figurative child of his labors was born and he saw only good stretching out before him.

And he had more than just figurative children, he had real ones, although it was his many wives who went through the labors. Born to his wife number one was his firstborn son, Amnon. Born to another wife were his second son Absalom and a daughter Tamar; both Absalom and Tamar were supposedly very fair to look upon. The Bible says that Absalom had beautiful hair, and he would only cut it once a year, whereupon he would weigh it; it is said that it weighed three and half pounds. I honestly don't know where we get the conception that *women* are vain.

The kids grew up into adulthood and, listen carefully here because this is the bible that is appropriate for tender ears, Amnon, the firstborn, became infatuated with his half-sister Tamar. So through deceit and guile he lured her into his bedroom, and he, um, well, raped her. Absalom, in the fullness of time, coldly planned the revenge of this wrong done to his sister, and he lured Amnon to a dinner and well, um, murdered him. David banished his son Absalom, and years later allowed him to return but David would not either see or speak to him. So Absalom "stole the heart of the people of Israel" and fomented a civil war to steal the throne from his father

David. He lost. We read the conclusion today as Absalom died and David grieved. "Oh Absalom, my son, my son!"

There's no happy ending here, people. In fact, there's not even a moral you can pull out of this story. It's horrible. We see deceit, incest, rape, murder, court intrigue, civil war, the death of over 20,000 men. And we end up with a father crying for his son, a son who died while trying to usurp his father's throne. What started with the vigor, strength and enthusiasm of youth ends up with helpless, powerlessness of grief, the inability to turn the clock back and make things better. No happy ending. No moral for the faithful. Just the tragedy of a life like so many others.

Now I suppose at this point most of you are out there thinking, "Boy, am I glad I came to church today! The minister is just so upbeat, and the message is just so inspiring, that I just thank my guardian angel for motivating me to take the time to be here this morning." No, no, don't thank me. I'm just doing my job.

And my job is to preach the whole Bible, not just the parts that are comfortable, not just the parts that inspire, not just the parts that make us all warm and fuzzy inside. Which is a bit like all our lives, I suppose. Who here can tell me that your life is all comfort? Who here can tell me you feel inspired all the day long, every day? Who here can tell me that you're just a warm gob of fuzziness from morning to night? Who here can tell me that all the stories of your life have happy endings? And yet I have found that people expect all that from the Church and from the Bible, and their own lives, and then some. And then are disappointed when it doesn't happen. It's almost as if people sometimes feel that church failed us by lying to us, telling us to expect that good people who go to church have happy endings. And if that is what churches have done, then they have failed; then they have, in fact, lied.

We've lost something in our churches that we desperately need to reclaim. Church is not only a place where we come to be happy, though it is that. It is not only a place where we learn God's ways and to be faithful, though it is that. It is not only a place where we bring the best that is in us, though it is also that. The Church, the living Body of Christ in our midst, is also a place where we bring our grief and our pain. It is also a place where we bring our doubts and fears and depression. It is also a place where we bring, not only the best in us, but the worst in us—our failures, our wrongs, our sins. The Church has got to be there for the totality of who we are and what we meet outside these walls; the Church is failing in its mission unless it is there for the very guts of life.

And the guts of life reveal that each of us here, like king David, knows the confidence and enthusiasm of youth; and each of us here, like David, knows the reality of shattered dreams, gut-wrenching pain, and the death of those we love. From marriages that begin in hope and excitement and expectation and then don't work out the way we hope or dream, to alienation between ourselves and our parents, or children, or siblings; from jobs that begin with hope and expectation and then don't pan out the way we want, to the unending stress and emptiness of the "good life" once we have finally attained it: I doubt there is even one of us who does not know the despair of the psalmist, *Out of the depths I cry to thee, O Lord!* Sometimes there are no happy endings, and not even happy people.

And this is precisely where the Church comes in. Because with this book we call the Bible we read stories about people just like us who are at times beaten down by life; and from these master stories that don't have happy endings, we can begin to knit meaning and purpose back into the fabric of who we are and what we do. Reading the Bible isn't like going to the movies and watching the good guys win; reading with and praying with the Bible is a means to finding a way of hope and meaning in the real world that all of us live in every day.

And perhaps this story of David and Absalom is particularly helpful here, because the horror and tragedy are not masked and made to look rosy. And, more than that, as Christians, it gives us a powerful segue

to understand the way in which God in Christ seeks to heal our lives, and ultimately the world. Think about David and Absalom a moment (and please, take the time to read the story in 2 Samuel): we see here a father who loved his son deeply. *And yet*, and this is crucial here, despite his love, he lived in a state of alienation from his son. His love alone was not enough to accomplish what would have been the most important work of his life: forgiveness. Don't get me wrong here, an act of forgiveness here would be agonizingly difficult for anyone. After all, Absalom had murdered his own brother, David's firstborn son. Imagine, imagine what it would take to offer genuine forgiveness here. It's worth asking if it is even possible, possible to forgive one's own child for the murder of one's firstborn. "Out of the depths I cry to thee, O Lord . . . "

But isn't that what the cross is all about: forgiving one's own children for the crucifixion of him who was the first child—and in that act of forgiveness offering us a way out of the depths? Do you see? It is only when we are able to forgive sin even this great, that we can begin to find our way out of the depths. And we can only forgive in this way, when we come to know in our own hearts, that we have been first forgiven. We can only forgive in this way when we understand that the choice is literally between life and death, blessing and curse. We can only forgive in this way, because the one on the cross did not condemn, but prayed, "Forgive them, for they know not what they do." We love because God in Christ first loved us; and we forgive because God in Christ first forgave, and forgives, us. God has offered us a way out of hell.

Only each of you knows personally the depth of your individual pain. Only each of you knows where you need to be forgiven, and where you need to forgive. The Church is here, to proclaim in Christ's name, no matter how great the sin, it is possible. There is a way out of hell. And you will find that way by being with God in the place we call prayer. Because it is there that God can touch your heart and heal your wounds. Because in prayer we build a relationship with the One who can stand beside us in our pain, knowing intimately how horribly it hurts. Because in prayer, we finally find that Way, that straight and narrow Way that leads to the peace and the rest we so earnestly seek. So with the psalm as our guide through the internal wilderness in our soul, we can pray with confidence and hope:

Out of the depths I cry to thee, O Lord.

Lord, hear my voice! Let thine ears be attentive to the voice of my supplication.

If thou, O Lord, shouldst mark iniquity, Lord, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with thee that thou mayest be revered.

I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in God's word I hope. My soul waits for God, more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning.

O Israel, hope in the Lord! For with God there is steadfast love and great power to redeem. And God will redeem you from all your iniquities.

Amen and amen.

The Reverend George C. Anastos

PASTORAL PRAYER

We confess, all-loving Creator, that we live in a world where anger grows in the darkness. We confess we live in a world where lies and evil and bitterness are often spoken to and about one another. We confess that we live in a world where the powerful steal the simple necessities of life and the common dignity of those who have no voice in the seats of authority. We confess that we have participated in this brokenness through our own apathy and our own sin.

In our baptism we were freed from slavery to that sin—alienation—and to all that divides us from one another. We were made one in Christ. In our baptism we were blessed with the inward wisdom and comfort of the Holy Spirit. We were made people of the light. Call us back to the waters this day, all-loving Creator, where we can be freed and enlightened again.

Keep watch, dear Lord, with those who work, or watch, or weep, this day, and give your angels charge over all. Tend the sick, Lord Christ; give rest to the weary; bless the dying; soothe the suffering; pity the afflicted; shield the joyous, and all for thy love's sake.

Hear these our prayers, O God, and those prayers so deep in our hearts that only thou knowest them.