

Finding God in the Forest

Ephesians 4:25-5:2 | John 6:35; 41-51 | 2 Samuel 18

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August 8, 2021

The second half of the books of Samuel are about consequences - some predicted and even prophesied, some unforeseen, some totally surprising. Some of these consequences seem proportional to the actions that set them in motion - others leave us wondering whether those actions were deserving of less or more. The turning point in the narrative we discussed last week - King David's crimes against Bathsheba and Uriah, which the Prophet Nathan promised would ultimately spell the king's doom. And now here we are - a battle scene in which David faces an insurrection led by his own son Absalom. The king's actions had broken up another family, so the prophet had said that God would raise up trouble against David from within his own house. This is especially painful for a king who has invested so much of himself in creating a dynasty for his family. Absalom is killed in this battle - and that is a temporary solution to David's problems, but the father is now gravely damaged emotionally and politically.

The narrator sums up the horrible scene in one artful line. "The battle spread across all the face of the country, and the forest claimed more lives that day than the sword." We've heard similar things said about wars closer to us in our own circumstances. How many soldiers in the civil war were killed not by musket fire or bayonets but by illness and disease? In World War I it wasn't just the bombs and shrapnel but the horrible conditions of the trenches. The narrator is saying that the violence of David's war is cruel and unforgiving, but the worst part of it all is the needless tragedy and misery everyone experiences in these horrible circumstances. The forest is meant figuratively, too. You might think of it not literally as a forest full of trees, but imagine it as the thicket of selfish desires, political calculations, and thoughtless actions that have consumed David's family and community. To say that the forest claimed more lives that day than the sword is to acknowledge the complexity of the pain that has consumed everyone around the king. It's not unlike how we look back on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The fighting was horrible. The wars themselves brought so much destruction. But how did we find ourselves in such a protracted and solutionless conflict? It wasn't one choice or one person - it was a grand system, it was a confluence of destructive powers, it was a horrible ecosystem of grief and pride and anger. We were there every step of the way, but still our circumstances are a mystery to us. We can't fully explain why it's gotten so bad. We might say the forest claimed more lives than the sword.

The forest is dark, frightening, and consuming. But it's interesting that the narrator would choose this turn of phrase because we have also experienced the presence of God in the darkness of the forest. They say that Israel was lost in the wilderness for forty years. Perhaps it's more accurate to say that Israel was landless or homeless for 40 years - they weren't exactly lost because God was still with them. God kept Israel in the wilderness for forty years. God cared for Israel in the wilderness for forty years. Speaking to the crowd in John's Gospel, Jesus makes this point - did your ancestors not eat manna in the wilderness that God had provided? So we may get lost in the wilderness; we might be consumed by the forest - but there is no brush or thicket so dense that God will not come and find us.

Of course John's Gospel says that Jesus is himself the form in which God comes and finds us when we are lost. Jesus says that he is the bread that God has sent from heaven. Eat this bread. Drink this cup. The Eucharist is the sign that God is coming to us wherever we find

ourselves. It's also the bread that feeds us and strengthens us so that when we are in the forest we are not consumed by it. Let me say that again and in another way: When we consume the Body of Christ we will not be consumed by the forest. When we eat this bread and drink this cup we keep close to Christ and that is our comfort and security in the when our lives take us to fearful places.

But staying close to Christ does not just make us feel better - this bread of heaven actually changes us by making us more like Christ. As Paul has written to the Ephesians, "be imitators of God" by living in love and Christ has lived in generous love for all of us. If the forest is consumed with anger, the love of Christ will bring peace. If the forest is consumed with terror, the love of Christ will bring calm. If the forest is consumed with death, the love of Christ will bring life. By faith we remember that God is with us when we walk through the darkest places. And by feeding on what God has provided, we become contributors to the healing and wholeness that is needed.

Eat. Drink. Be imitators of God's love. Do not despair. We are provided with the Bread of Heaven wherever we find ourselves.