

- Frederick Buechner says of today's first lesson, from the start, Absalom had strikes against him. For one thing, he was much too handsome for his own good. And Absalom's special pride was such a magnificent head of hair that once a year, when he had his hair trimmed, the trimmings alone tipped the scales at 3 1/2 pounds. For another thing, his father, King David, was always either spoiling him rotten or reading him the riot act. And this did not promote stability of character in Absalom. Absalom murdered his lecherous brother Amnon for fooling around with their sister Tamar. And when the old war horse Joab wouldn't help him patch things up with King David afterwards, he set fire to his hayfield. All Israel found Absalom's derring-do irresistible, of course. And when Absalom eventually led a revolt against his own father, a lot of them joined in. On the eve of the crucial battle, David was a wreck. David was afraid that he might lose his throne, but he was even more afraid that he might lose his son Absalom. The boy was the thorn in his flesh, but he was also the apple of his eye. And before the fighting started, David told the chiefs of staff till they were sick of hearing that if Absalom fell into their clutches, they must promise to go easy on him for his father's sake. Remembering what had happened to his hayfield, when old Joab heard this, he kept his fingers crossed. And when Joab found Absalom caught in the branches of an oak tree by his legendarily beautiful hair, he ran him through without blinking an eye. When they broke the news to King David, it broke his heart, just as simple as that. And David cried out in words that have echoed down through the centuries. "Oh, my son Absalom, my son, my son, Absalom. "Would that I had died instead of you, "oh Absalom, my son, my son." Poet Randall Jarrell speaks of the dark, uneasy world of family life, where the greatest can fail. Was he speaking of this Sunday's Old Testament lesson? The death of Absalom and David's moving lament? It does seem that in the area of family life, sometimes it does seem the greatest people make the worst messes of it. Oh my son, Absalom, my son, my son, Absalom. David's anguished lament echoes down the ages. Would that I would have died instead of you. Oh Absalom, my son, my son. We haven't heard King David weep like that. This is quite a contrast with earlier scenes of David's life. You remember when we first met King David? Yeah. Young man David with the whole world at his feet standing over the body of the giant Goliath. Brash boy David, who you know when you first meet him, he's going to be, one day, king. But years ago, the prophet Nathan told David, "A sword will never depart from your house." And it was true. It was true. Though David's son Absalom was the next in line for the throne, Absalom couldn't wait. Absalom plotted against his own father, forcing David to flee Jerusalem for his life. But now Absalom is dead. "Absalom, Absalom," cries King David. His wail echoes down the centuries. In every other family tragedy. In every parent full of regret. For what might have been but is not. In every parent whose love and whose dreams, and sacrifice have been squandered or rejected by an ungrateful child. Or in the lament of every child whose parents' dreams don't fit those of the child. Alan Paton brilliantly reworked the Absalom story in his 1948 South African novel *Cry, the Beloved Country*. In *Cry, the Beloved Country*, Stephen Kumalo, a black pastor, has a wayward son who's named Absalom. Absalom rejects his family. He eventually is led into a life of crime. He commits a murder and he hangs because of his crime. And in his attempt to find some redemption for his tragedy, Kumalo meets and befriends James Jarvis, the white man whose son has been killed by Absalom's violence. The two fathers meet and they find comfort through one another in their mutual grief because of their sons. Like Stephen Kumalo, how many parents down through the ages have

had to keep on and go on living even when they did not want to after the death of a child? How many parents have had to take life and work to find some means of redemption after a child's death or after a child's horrible mistake? Napoleon said, "All celebrated people "tend to lose dignity when they are viewed at close range." And when you view, as the Bible does, a great man like King David at close range, he really does have feet of clay. Particularly when you see David at home with his family. David. David, who could make an empire but couldn't manage his own kids. And yet that is probably the aspect of the King David story that endears him most to us, those of us who are parents. A few years ago when the House of Windsor was having its problems with the separation of Charles and Lady Di, a British commentator, when questioned by an American inquirer said, "But you don't understand, "far from diminishing Queen Elizabeth's stature "among the British public," he said, "the sight of the queen having the same troubles "in her family that all of us have got in ours "has really endeared her to all of us. "It's her finest moment." Recently, I heard a comedian say much the same in explaining why he had voted for President Clinton in the last election. He said, "Look, this man has got problems like real people. "He doesn't have presidential problems. "He's got problems in his marriage and problems with money "and problems with lawyers. "Those are real people's problems, that's why I love him." And I'm often amazed, you know, when you read the biography of some famous person, some great person who's known fame and fortune, how that person invariably has also known great tragedy. And usually at home. Reading the biography of Eleanor Roosevelt, I came to appreciate how much pain this great and noble woman had had in her own life. Her marriage came unraveled early. Yet, she and Franklin Roosevelt picked up the pieces and they held their heads up high and they continued. But that didn't mean that the pain did not stop for Eleanor. Until the day that she died, Eleanor Roosevelt was filled with great regret, resentment, over the way Franklin had dealt with her when she was a naive young woman. And we would like for stories, like the story of Eleanor and Franklin, we would like for them to have a happy ending, to come to some kind of good resolution. But in life, there's rarely a final act in the play where everything is pulled together and the bad are identified and punished and the good are rewarded and everything is set right and justice is done. This past week, I was with a pastor in a little southern town and he had been to a funeral, he had conducted a funeral one afternoon and he came back from the funeral and he had told about the tensions at the funeral home the night before the funeral. And he had told about the conflict in the family that you could feel standing out there at the cemetery. And he said, "The main thing you do at funerals "is you don't deal so much in some "of these families with grief, "what you deal with is regret." Just lots of family regret because it isn't over out there at the cemetery, it's just a whole lot of regret in the average family. In real life, in real families, rarely do stories have a kind of satisfying conclusion. And in the Bible, David wanted to preserve his kingdom. He wanted to pass it down to his children. A kingdom in which David had brought power and prominence to Israel. But the cost of preserving his rule was higher than even David imagined. The death of his son. When David wails and says that he wishes that he had died rather than Absalom, I believe him. He's telling the truth. But he can't. Parents, like David, wish that they could stand in for their children. They wish that they could stand up there and take some of the blows which life often offers. You wish you could do it for your children so they wouldn't have to stumble and fall and... But only they can live their lives. Shakespeare in *The Winter's Tale* said, "What's gone is gone, and what's past help "should be past grief." But it isn't, 'cause how can one stop grieving for one that is so deeply beloved as a child? Even the most wayward of children. So, I'm saying that this story of David and Absalom's death ends in regret, lots of regret. With a father crying out into the night in grief over his son, over the sad state of his family, over the high cost of fulfilling royal responsibility. I

don't think there's a lesson here for us to learn this morning. I don't think there's some moral example for us to follow, someone we're supposed to emulate. The writer of this tale does not offer this story for our little moralistic lessons. Rather, I think we're supposed to see ourselves in this story. In any family, even the best of them, maybe particularly the best of them, there's a lot of regret. Things don't work out for the best. Children disappoint. Parents do not act mature and loving and balanced as they ought. A man said to me the other day that he remembers being here at Duke and when the president welcomed him to Duke, President Few welcomed him to Duke, welcoming them here to the university, telling them they had some great years ahead of them as students, and then he said, "I'll always remember one "of the most stunning things, "it's virtually the only thing I remember "from my four years there as an undergraduate, "President Few ended his sermon and he says, "I just want you remember one thing, your parents "probably did the best they could with you, okay?" For all the sad words of tongue or pen, the saddest are these, it might have been. And you come to church, I know, you come to church expecting to get things explained. And wanting to get things fixed. But know there are times when you come to church for help in what to do with a tragedy when things can't be fixed, 'cause there's a lot of life like that. And that's why I'm glad this story is in the Bible. With all of its envy and violence and ineptitude and blood and regret, I'm glad it's there, because this story lets us know that unhappiness and tragedy, regret, that's part of loving and living in a family. It was true for King David, it is true at your house and my house. We're in a mess. Particularly in family, there is regret and things don't turn out as they were planned and we can't get everything together. We can't make it work out all right. And if we are hurt and hurt in our families, how much more must God be hurting for the faults and the foibles of God's whole human family? As I heard an old preacher say when we sung a hymn one morning, "To be near to the heart of God," as we'd been singing, "to be near to the heart "of God is to be near to a heart that is breaking." What's to become of David's troubled family? What's to become of God's troubled family? A cross. A cross is raised outside the capital city. Upon it hangs a beloved son, a son who hangs there not because of rebellion against his father, but rather because of our rebellion. The father gives everything for his kingdom. Even now giving his only son. That cross, it doesn't set everything right. The cross does not erase the seriousness of the evil we commit. But rather, the cross forgives and makes possible for life to continue, despite the mess, the regret, and the tragedy. David said, "I would've given my own life to spare my son." But even kings can't do that. No, it takes a God to do that. At Calvary, outside the city of David, on a cross. God's whole tragic human family got gathered, embraced, forgiven, saved, by a father who, still in regret and grief, manages to love us even yet.