

Title: An Uncivil Civil War
Text: 2 Samuel 2.12-32
Theme: Our need of mercy
Series: 2 Samuel #4
Prop Stmtnt: Violence is the currency of a godless life.

The mass shootings are tragic and baffling, aren't they? The Violence Project is a non-profit research group that says that the data shows that mass shootings are clearly on the rise. It's not that we are simply hearing more about them due to an always on media, but there are more events to hear about. If you define a mass shooting where four or more people are killed (not including the shooter), then in the decade of the 1980's there were 23 incidents. In the decade of the 90's there were 37. There were also 37 in the first decade of the 2000's. In the 2010's there were 56 and we are well on our way to breaking that number in this decade. It is very clear to me from Scripture, from history and from culture that violence is the currency of a godless life. Therefore, violence is the currency of a godless culture.

Let me connect a couple of dots. Tony Dungy is the former coach of the Tampa Bay Buccaneers and the Indianapolis Colts with whom he won a Super Bowl. You would think that being the first African American to win a Super Bowl would be celebrated, but Tony is publicly pro-life and is not pro-LGBTQ and no matter how kind and compassionate he is, that has more than a few talking heads rather worked up. One writer describes him as, "amiable right-wing zealotry." He is amiable for sure. He is not violent because he is not godless. The truth is, Tony's life is marked by a profound faith in Christ and that is evidence by an unwillingness to be a violent person, particularly to the least among us, the defense-less, unborn. We have attempted to ban God from our classrooms and the public square. In response, we get violence. Do you see the connection? The more Godless we are, the more violent we are. Apart from God, we have no hope to temper the human heart. This is true of a nation. It is true of a person. It is true of those who should know better.

Read Text:

The chapter begins with David inquiring of the Lord and the Lord answering him (1-7). David's actions are contrasted with Abner's who takes matters into his own hands (8-11). But Abner is not the only one who takes matters into his own hands and tries to force his will and get his way. We are prone to like David and give his men the benefit of the doubt. We read accounts like this and it is easy to find ourselves already cheering for David's side. But we need to wait a minute and not be so hasty. When you read this account and let it stand on its own merits, we have to admit that the narrator is not presenting a moral hero. In fact, there is almost nothing in this text to commend as an example. Joab doesn't look any better than Abner. There is a lot of death. There is folly, revenge, threats and death. This is an ugly story. One side is the winner, kind of, if the side who has fewer die is how we are going to determine that. But there is no joy. The victory is so costly, it is difficult to call it a victory and it doesn't feel like a victory. Even though the one side only lost 19 and the other side, 360, one of the 19 was Asahel. Asahel was one of David's 30 mighty men. He was David's nephew and Joab's younger brother. His loss was

hard to calculate. The scene ends where it begins. Abner is back at Mahanaim and Joab is back at Hebron and nothing is resolved. God is not mentioned here. He is not leaned on and in the end, the heat of revenge from a blood feud has only been turned up. And this is a blood feud.

Last week, I think I said that Abner was the uncle of King Saul. (slide) He wasn't. He was his cousin. He was the uncle to Ish-bosheth, whom he appointed as king. Abner had reasons for resentment of David and it really looks like he resented David, at least at this point. In verse 13, we are introduced to Joab. (slide) Joab is a nephew of David. He will be a big part of the story for the next 40 years. He is strong, savvy, but not necessarily godly. He can be violent, shrewd and political. David comes to resent the fact that he depends so much on him. Joab has no mercy. Joab and Abner are enemies and yet, they are at the same time, on the same side. David is not like these men and the contrast in these accounts make this point very well. David is an outlier. He does not look like his world. His reactions of mercy are not shared by many of those around him. They really do not understand him. Violence is the currency of a godless life and both Abner and Joab deal in it liberally. Here a godless life is sadly displayed in four ways:

1. **Dismissive of life.** (12-17)

Abner has a contingent of soldiers with him from the tribe of Benjamin. Joab has soldiers with him who are part of David's army. They meet at and around a pool in Gibeon. Btw, this pool is believed to have been found. (pic) The narrator uses identical language to describe the men and their actions. This is part of why I believe that we are supposed to see how much these men are like each other. Of course, there are questions that we don't have answers to. Who set this meeting up? What was the point of it? Was this intended to explore a possible truce or to at least open up some dialogue between the two sides to see if there was a way forward without bloodshed? Was this a military threat by Abner and Joab was coming out to confront him? We simply do not know. It seems to me given the fact that that "*they sat down, the one on the one side of the pool and the other on the other side of the pool*" that this may have been an initial attempt at negotiating some kind of relationship between the two sides. Clearly, they do not trust one another, but one side does not attack the other.

Up until now, Abner is the initiator. He is the one who appoints Ish-bosheth king. He is the one who travels the longer distance for this meeting or confrontation. He may have been the one who proposed this meeting. He is the one who seeks to take control of it when at some point he says, "Let the young men arise and compete before us." The word compete has the idea of entertain. Joab agrees. This is sick. You pick 12 and I will pick 12 and we will see who is the better. Both Abner and Joab are very casual about sacrificing the lives of their men for their bragging rights. So, 12 counted off from each side and they fight, hand to hand. The writer sets us up for what happens. They sat down together (13). They arose together (15). They fell together (16). Each caught the other by the head with one hand and thrust their sword into their opponent's side with the other. The result? 24 dead soldiers. 24 sets of parents stunned with the news that their son died, needlessly, callously. 24 potential widows robbed of a husband, and father for their children. For what? It sounds barbaric, because it is. You may be a soldier. You may be in law enforcement. You may work in the E.R., ICU, oncology or with

hospice, but familiarity with death does not have to mean being casual or calloused about it. Life is amazing because life is nothing short of a stunning act of God. It is both treacherous and treasonous to be casual, dismissive and calloused about life.

A few days ago, the president said, "I believe Roe got it right." That decision resulted in the killing of 63 million people. Now, I realize that we are convictionally pro-life. So, I am not saying this to get a rise out of you because I am preaching to the choir. I am trying to connect some dots that help you make sense of a senseless world. You cannot have a country that murders 63 million people without fall-out and collateral damage. "Oh, but they are not people, it is a fetus or it is a zygote." Oh, that's all? Just a zygote? I want you to listen to Siddhartha Mukherjee's description of a zygote. I take this from page 138 of his most recent best-selling book, "The Song of the Cell" where he says, "*But let's return to the zygote floating in the womb. The fertilized cell soon divides into two, then two into four, and so forth, until a small ball of cells is formed. The cells keep dividing and moving ... until the initial mass of cells hollows out within, like a water balloon with a fluid-filled center and the newly formed cells creating the walls of the balloon – a structure called the blastocyst. And a tiny furl of cells divides further and begins to hang off the inner wall of the hollow ball. The outer walls of the cave – the lining of the balloon – will attach to the maternal womb and become part of the placenta, the membranes that surround the fetus, and the umbilical cord. The little bat-like lump of cells hanging inside the ball will develop into the human fetus.*

The next series of events represents the true marvel of embryology. The tiny cluster of cells hanging from the walls of the cellular balloon, the inner cell mass, divides furiously and begins to form two layers of cells – the outer one called the ectoderm, and the inner called the endoderm. And about three weeks after conception, a third layer of cells invades the two layers and lodges itself between them, like a child squeezing into bed between her parents. It's now the middle layer, called the mesoderm.

This three-layered embryo – ectoderm, mesoderm, endoderm-is the basis of every organ in the human body. The ectoderm will give rise to everything that faces the outer surface of the body: skin, hair, nails, teeth, even the lens of the eye. The endoderm produces everything that faces the inner surface of the body, such as the intestines and the lungs. The mesoderm handles everything in the middle: muscle, bone, blood, heart.

The embryo is now ready for the final sequence of activities. Within the mesoderm, a series of cells assemble along a thin axis to form a rodlike structure called the notochord, which spans from the front of the embryo to its back. The notochord will become the GPS of the developing embryo, determining the position and axis of the internal organs as well as secreting proteins called inducers. In response, just above the notochord, a section of the ectoderm – the outer layer – invaginates, folding inward and forming a tube. This tube will become the precursor of the nervous system, made up of the brain, spinal cord, and nerves.

In one of the embryology's many ironies, having set up the framework of the embryo, the human notochord will lose its prominence and function between embryonic development and

adulthood. Its only cellular remnant in the adult human body is the pulp that remains stuck between the skeletal bones. In the end, the master maker of the embryo is trapped inside the bony prison of the very creature it has created.

Once the notochord and the neural tube have been generated, individual organs begin to form out of the three layers (four, if you count the neural tube): the primitive heart, the liver bud, the intestines, the kidneys. About three weeks after gestation, the heart will generate its first beat. A week later, one part of the neural tube will begin to protrude out into the beginnings of the human brain. All of this, remember, emerged from a single cell: the fertilized egg.” He then quotes Lewis Thomas who said, “at a certain stage there emerges a single cell which will have as all its progeny the human brain. The mere existence of that cell should be one of the great astonishments of the earth.”¹

Yea, it sure is! That is life. The mere existence and formation of life is astonishing. You are an astonishing creation brought into being by the supernatural design and oversight of God. You and every human being are a mind-forming and mind-blowing masterpiece. Anyone who is dismissive of life is dismissive of God. That is why violence is the currency of the godless. In the functional absence of God, we live as if we are God. That is pride and pride is the root of evil and the source of folly.

2. **Driven by pride.** (18-23)

The 12 on 12 stalemate, ignited a battle where Abner’s men from Benjamin were defeated by Joab’s men. Abner was running for his life and Asahel, Joab’s youngest brother, was chasing him. Abner was older and slower, but older and more experienced. He knew his opponent and called him by name. Is it you, Asahel? Asahel said, “It is I.” Abner tried to reason with him. In essence he said that this will not go well for you. I don’t want to kill you because if I kill you then your brother and I will be locked into a blood feud that will be disastrous and I don’t want that. However, if I have to, I will kill you. So, for your sake for all our sake’s stop chasing me. If you have to have something for your efforts, get some spoils from one of my men who has been killed, but stop chasing me. Asahel was going to make a name for himself that day. He was going to kill the commander of the enemy’s army and make a name for himself. Keep in mind, that Asahel was already one of David’s 30 mighty men. He already had made a name for himself, but it wasn’t enough. That day, his pride ruled his sense and he refused to listen to reason. All that he could think about was how much glory he would receive from killing Abner. His lust for glory, his thirst for his pride blinded him to his own peril. Abner could not outrun Asahel who was as fast as a gazelle, so Abner used Asahel’s strength against him. Abner stopped suddenly and drove the butt end of his spear into the gut of Asahel who could not stop in time. His gruesome death sent shockwaves through the troops and for a time, the battle was paused.

¹ The Song of the Cell, pp. 138-140, Scribner Press. 2022

There are times when determination is a strength. But determination apart from humility and godly wisdom is deadly folly. You see it in road rage, you see it in sports, you see it in so many mass shootings. You see it in your home and in arguments in your family. Someone feels disrespected. Someone feels mistreated. Someone is trying to make a name for themselves. If you are ruled by your pride, you will be ruled by anger. If you are ruled by anger, you will lose.

How do you respond when you do not get your way? Asahel was killed. Joab and Abishai wanted revenge. When you live as if God does not matter, reason is thrown out the window. Asahel did not have to die. Joab and Abishai were hellbent on making Abner pay.

3. **Ruled by revenge.** (24-28)

Joab and Abishai chased Abner to the hill of Ammah where a group of Benjamites rallied with Abner in order to take a stand on the high ground. Once again, Abner initiates the dialogue and tries to reason with Joab. Now, in this case, Joab listens, at least for the moment and the battle is called off. But we are still scratching our heads. Abner appears to be the one who initiated this. He is the one who anointed Ish-bosheth king. He is the one who came the long distance for this confrontation. He is the one who suggested that the young men fight it out for sport. Then he lectures Joab on the futility of fighting against brothers? From what we know about Abner and will continue to learn, I doubt that Abner would have been as eager for peace, if he had been winning this battle.

4. **No happy ending.** (29-32)

This account ends where it begins. Abner is back in Mahanaim and Joab is back in Hebron. Both of them have fewer men and Joab, in particular has lost his brother. Nothing has really changed. Both sides march back home. Abner has to tell 360 families that their sons won't be coming back. Joab and his brother have to bury their brother and tell everyone at Hebron that one of the 30 has been lost. The whole thing is empty, sad and unresolved.

We've come to the end of the chapter and there is no good news here. Everyone does not live happily ever after. There is no reconciliation or peace. In fact, we have 2 more chapters of ugly history before things get better. So, how are we supposed to think of this? Chapters 2-4 cover 7 years of history and there really isn't that much detail that is given. So, why does the Spirit of God choose these accounts? Again, I think it is because we are seeing how much Israel needs a good king and how unlike his world, David really was. Even though Abner and Joab are on opposite sides politically, militarily and even family, they are in another sense on the same side. They both approach power from a godless perspective. They use people, abuse them and resort to violence to get their way, because in the end, that is all that they have.

Our world, our nation is a violent place because we are in so many ways, godless. I want you to be realistic about the heart of our need so you can be understanding about the solution. We need Christ. There is no hope for anyone apart from Christ. There is a lot that can be said about that, but I want us to see the opportunity that we have. Joab and Abishai buried their brother in

Bethlehem. 1,000 years later, David's son would be born in the city of David to Mary, who was Christ the Lord. He came because we could not save ourselves from our sin and we could not fix ourselves from the consequences of our sin. He came to a violent world and died a violent death in order to take upon himself the credit for every sin that we would ever commit. It is only through faith alone in Christ alone, are we justified and adopted into the family of God. This forgiveness and restoration by God and with God gives us peace with God and enables us to live at peace with one another. When the gospel is your heart, then the peace of God and the mercy and humility of Christ will be demonstrated in your life and our lives together. This is one of the primary ways in which we make Christ known. We are naturally born enemies because we naturally care about our turf, our image, our reputation, our stuff, our posture, our standing, etc. But, when natural born enemies love another, prefer one another, forgive one another, serve one another, pray for one another, and encourage one another, then something supernatural is taking place. That is what the gospel does. So, yes, the world is violent, dark, unforgiving and maddening. Some of the loudest and proudest voices who pretend to scream their identities and demand your approval are themselves some of the most fragile, empty and angry people you could ever meet. It is not working for them. They come to the end of every day, like we come to the end of this chapter. No matter what they have done, life is a mess. They need to know that this is not the end. There is a Savior. He is merciful. He can save. He can change us. He can forgive us. He can free us. And he will, if we turn from our sin and trust him, he will. Our love and life together is the billboard that tells them about Jesus. That is why we value life. We pursue humility. We are driven by grace. And we can laugh the laugh of faith, because we know that the ending is gloriously happy and never ends.