Running with the Right Message*
II Samuel 18: 9-33

Introduction

The story of King David's love for his rebellious son Absalom is a poignant narrative in literature. Absalom, the third of David's sons, is reputed to have been quite handsome with a well developed physique and long, flaxen hair, of which he was proud. Seemingly, his youthful rebellion caused him to win the hearts of the people and to enter into battle against the army of his father, David.

David was caught in the unenviable position of doing what was best for Israel and at the same time wanting leniency for Absalom. As his army marched to suppress the insurrection led by Absalom's followers, David gave explicit instructions to his commanders to "deal gently with Absalom."

The battle was fought in the forest of Ephraim. David's troops, experienced and more strategically prepared, dealt Absalom's forces a crushing defeat. In the course of the battle, Absalom, riding on a mule, was hung as he passed under the bough of an oak tree. Tradition says that his hair became tangled in the tree, leaving him helplessly suspended. Joab, David's commander, took sharpened sticks and drove them through Absalom's body which was then buried under a pile of stones. The battle ended and David's troops were victorious.

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But who would tell the King of this mixed blessing? Who would tell him that he had successfully quelled the *coup d'etat*, but that his beloved son was killed? Especially, who would tell him that his commander had killed his son? In those days the bearer of good news was rewarded quite handsomely and those carrying bad news were often put to death. Therefore, you can understand that there was not a long line of persons volunteering to carry the message to David.

In characteristic form they selected an Ethiopian (Cushite) slave, a conscripted water bearer, to run with a message. He was an ordinary slave, considered expendable. Not knowing the territory, he ran up difficult hills and across perilous plains, through forests and open countryside with his message of both glory and gloom.

Ahimaaz, son of the high priest, Zadok, was also in the general area of the battle site. He, too, wanted to run to tell David what had happened. Joab tried to restrain him in that he did not have a message to relate. Ahimaaz was persistent, however, and Joab finally relented. Ahimaaz ran a more direct route and overtook the Cushite, arriving first at the King's castle.

David spotted Ahimaaz and recognized him. One can imagine that his heart pounded within his breast as he awaited word of his son's welfare. "Is all well with the young man Absalom?" David asked. It is not known whether Ahimaaz actually witnessed the events leading to Absalom's death, or whether he was afraid of the negative consequences of bringing bad news to the King. At any rate he blurted forth with the words, "I saw a great tumult but I do not know what happened." David told him, "Stand aside."

By this time the Cushite reached the city and was asked about the welfare of Absalom. He gave David an accurate account of Absalom's death. Retiring to an isolated spot on the roof of his house, David cried out. "O my son! Absalom my son, my son Absalom. If only I had died instead of you! O Absalom, my son, my son."

Today, however, I want you to think about this story as it relates to your education and preparation for service. You are here for a particular purpose, and you are required to run with the right message. Failing to do this, society is prepared to say, "Stand aside." Three things come to mind as I think about this subject regarding your future and impending leadership in the world community. The first is the need to internalize the information you gain here. Second, you must remember that the fastest route is not always the best one toward a goal. Third, the message you carry from this school needs to be value-oriented. Let us look at these requirements in greater detail.

Need to Internalize

Firstly. if you are to run with the right message as a result of your education, you will have to internalize an incredible amount of information and seek to make it useful for personal and professional purposes. John Naisbitt reminds us that we are living in an "Information Age." This information is only helpful, however, if it has been assorted, assimilated, internalized and utilized. Unless it is translated into life situations, it is of no value.

Ahimaaz was there in the forest of Ephraim. However, when called upon to give an account of what he had experienced, his message was uninformed. He had to "stand aside." You are approaching that moment of truth in your lives when all that you have engaged will be tested. The world is prepared to ask you difficult and direct questions. The people need to hear about the moral and philosophical appropriateness of the probing of deep space. What does it mean and what difference does it make that we cannot reach synthesis in life? We move from revolution to another revolution, seldom gaining what Aristotle calls "The Golden Mean." How can we in this nation justify our vast wealth and almost unlimited store of food in a world that is hungry and getting belligerent about it? What about war and peace? Can we participate as successfully in "waging peace" as others have effectively waged war ? How are we to cope with the dilemmas in the field of bioethics? What about South Africa? What is our role in helping to build their new nation? What is our role in stemming the negative trends in Black life today? Precious gains won with blood, sweat and tears are being lost. Have you thought about the fact that fewer Black youth are going to college today? What about the fact that Affirmative Action is being dismantled: presumably, it is felt that racial minorities and women have gained equality.

It would be my hope that as you prepare for service that your assimilated knowledge will be used to bring about a better social order, one that is humane and just. Your task is to translate truths of all the disciplines into usable, relevant forms, to wipe away the scales of ignorance and injustice. You are not being trained to be robots, i. e., simply giving out bookish,

unemotional truths. You are being educated to be humane practitioners, persons committed to people. Yours is the task of turning around some of the craziness that we experience today on every hand. It is fully expected that your running will be for a cause, one for which you are fully knowledgeable and articulate. You achieve this by internalizing everything you have learned.

Message to Achieve Goal

Secondly, the fastest route is not necessarily the best. Ahimaaz ran fast, took short cuts, and came up lacking. Maybe, if he had been less concerned with speed, he would have had a more useful message upon reaching the city. Often we take shortcuts to achieve certain goals, only to find that we are lacking when our day of reckoning comes. "We are weighed in the balance and found wanting."

We are living in a time when shortcuts can be the difference between life and death. Machinery and technology are so precise that any lack of preparation, any miscalculation, any misapplication can spell disaster. A careless shortcut in a chemical lab can have devastating consequences. We have already seen the dire circumstances caused by errors in the space program. It seems to me that one of the major contributions you can make to society is to slow us down long enough to internalize some of the vast information at our disposal. When you realize that most of the information available today did not exist twenty-

five years ago, you know we need a more deliberate pace.

I happen to believe that our greatest needs are relational: how do we experience the joys and fulfillment of our humanity? How do we construct a society that enjoys the aesthetic qualities of life? How do we help people love each other?

Your generation must help us regain a quality of life. Since Sputnik we have made a mad dash to acquire outer space. Now, you can help us acquire inner peace, quality lives and a world where war is not our last option, the answer to every international problem. Ahimaaz ran fast but did not have a message upon reaching his destination. You must run with the right message. The Bible says, "What good does it do to gain the whole world and lose your soul?" In other words, what good is it to make money, have a comfortable home, a car in each of three garage-bays, clothes of every description, and live a life of meaninglessness—no family, no friends, no confidants, no peace of mind.

Ahimaaz called to the King and said, "All is well." All was not well. David, you see, won a battle but lost a son.

Value-Oriented Message

Your message must be value-oriented with truth as its hallmark. It must deal with right and wrong. Morality is one of the great missing ingredients of our time. A Gallup poll, a number of years ago, indicated that religion is growing in importance among Americans

but morality is losing ground. Your instruction must help close the gap between what we define as values and what we demonstrate our values to be.

Love, compassion, sensitivity, humanness and mutuality should be characteristic of your message. Concern for the rights and well-being of others is vitally important. You see, the world is caught up in great confusion about moral values and someone needs to help sift through this perplexity. We need help to understand that sleeping around, alcohol and drug abuse, euthanasia, excuse-making, blaming others are a few of the dilemmas faced by moderns. These are questions of values. I happen to believe that this is your agenda for service. Teach us how to deal with these predicaments. In the story of Absalom's death, the writer says, "The forest killed more people that day than the sword." We, too, are living in a forest of conflicting values. Yours is the task of thinning out the trees so that we might not continue in the density of life's moral maze.

Conclusion

You will run from this place with a message, in fact with many messages: engagement to internalize information, the fastest route is not necessarily the best one to achieve a goal, and value-orientation. This is your agenda for service. Hopefully, you will run with the right message. Otherwise, someone will say, "Stand aside."