

David: "Stricken to the Heart"

SERMON BACKGROUND STUDY

5th Sunday in Lent

March 8 & 9, 2008

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Hebrews 11:32-34 (NRSV)

³²And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets—³³who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions,³⁴ quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight.

1 Samuel 24:1-7 (NRSV)

When Saul returned from following the Philistines, he was told, "David is in the wilderness of En-gedi."² Then Saul took three thousand chosen men out of all Israel, and went to look for David and his men in the direction of the Rocks of the Wild Goats.³ He came to the sheepfolds beside the road, where there was a cave; and Saul went in to relieve himself. Now David and his men were sitting in the innermost parts of the cave.⁴ The men of David said to him, "Here is the day of which the LORD said to you, 'I will give your enemy into your hand, and you shall do to him as it seems good to you.'" Then David went and stealthily cut off a corner of Saul's cloak.⁵ Afterward David was stricken to the heart because he had cut off a corner of Saul's cloak.⁶ He said to his men, "The LORD forbid that I should do this thing to my lord, the LORD's anointed, to raise my hand against him; for he is the LORD's anointed."⁷ So David scolded his men severely and did not permit them to attack Saul. Then Saul got up and left the cave, and went on his way.

[As Saul walks away, David calls out to him from the mouth of the cave. David again tells Saul that he has done the king no wrong. And Saul, in a sorrowful moment, agrees. Saul then asks that when he is dead, David would not kill Saul's household. And David promises just that.]

David

David is a towering figure in the story of God's people for several reasons. First, the Israelites came to embrace David as their greatest king, the man who consolidated the nation. For example, David conquered the city-state of Jerusalem and made it his capital. He brought the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem. His son, Solomon, would build God's temple there.

Second, David was more than just Israel's king. He was its poet, the composer of many psalms. The stories of David, Saul, Jonathan, Bathsheba, Absalom and the rest are the most skillfully drawn narratives in the OT. The writers and editors of the Hebrew Scriptures devote their best and most poignant story-telling to the story of David, from his defeat of Goliath to the tragedy of Absalom.

But there is another reason that the Israelites and we are so drawn to the figure of David. David may have been Israel's greatest king and he may have been a "man after God's own heart," but David, like us all, made terrible and tragic mistakes. It is a little surprising that the writers of Samuel told the story of David and Bathsheba at all. In it we see the story of a powerful man who yielded to temptation, eventually arranging the murder of his pregnant victim's husband. Later, David would fail his own overambitious sons. Such stories reassure us that even David, though, anointed by God, could make terrible choices against God and others, and yet remain within God's loving, gracious grasp.

It is one thing to preach forgiveness, it is another to forgive. When we are deeply wronged, the desire for revenge is often close to our hearts. In today's story, David foregoes the chance to kill the man who is seeking to kill him.

You begin to grasp the importance of David in the biblical story when you realize that he gets more narrative space in the Bible than anyone, with the exception of Jesus. More than Abraham. More even than Moses.

The obvious question is why David gets so much attention. Granted, the Jews came to see him as the idealized king of Israel, the one on whom God's Messiah would be modeled. But that doesn't really explain the immense care that the biblical writers of the book of Samuel took in telling the story and stories of David's life.

I just finished teaching an eight-week Bible Academy class on the life of David. Leading St. Andrew adults through a Bible study is always an enriching and eye-opening experience. I've come to believe that David gets such attention because in his life with God, we see not only the complexities and ambiguities of the human experience, we also gain a deeper understanding of our life with God. All its ups and downs. The times when we seem close to God and the times when God seems to disappear. It is all to be found in the stories of David.

The unexpected

Saul has twice tried to kill David in the royal palace and is now marching throughout the wilderness hunting down David and his men. As the text box on this page outlines, Saul is determined to eliminate his perceived rival. David is running for his life.

David and Saul

During the time that the Israelites settled in Canaan, they had no earthly king. The LORD God was their king. But as time wore on, the people, wanting to be like their neighbors, pushed harder and harder for a human king. In the end, God gave them what they wanted. God's prophet Samuel anointed Saul as the first king of the united tribes of Israel. Saul quickly proved to be a disappointment. He was disobedient to God and given to making rash decisions. Once, Saul was even ready to kill his own son, Jonathan, for breaking one of Saul's battle orders. Only the intervention of the people saved Jonathan's life. After Saul disobeyed God a second time, we are told that "The LORD was sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel" (1 Samuel 15:35).

God then tells his prophet Samuel to anoint a young shepherd named David as the next king of Israel. Not knowing that God had chosen David to be his successor, Saul welcomed David into the royal court as a musician. But after David defeated Goliath, the mentally and spiritually deteriorating Saul began to suspect that David might be the one to whom God had given Saul's kingdom. And his heart turned against David. For the rest of his life, Saul would seek to hunt down and kill David. The struggle ended only when Saul and his son, Jonathan, die in battle against the Philistines.

One day, David and his men are resting in the back of a cave. They notice that someone has entered the cave to relieve himself. But it's not just anyone. It is Saul! Can you imagine the astonished reaction among David's men as they sit quietly in the back of the cave. God was delivering David's enemy right into their hands. The hunter had become not just the hunted, but the helpless.

David's men are ready to pounce, but he holds them back. Instead, David crawls along the side of the cave to where Saul has tossed his robe so he can go about his business. David cuts off a piece of the royal robe and then crawls back to his men. They figure that the time has come to fall on Saul and bring a quick end to their struggle. After all, it can't be mere coincidence that Saul has chosen this cave. God is handing him over on a silver platter. Who in their right mind would let Saul simply walk out of the cave?

But David's heart is stricken by the act of cutting the royal robe. Such brazenness is a humiliation to Saul and, David thinks to himself, who am I to lift even a hand against God's anointed? David then scolds his men for wanting to kill Saul and they let Saul walk out of the cave.

While Saul is still within earshot, David steps out of the cave. He calls out to Saul and falls to the ground, bowing before the man who wants him dead. David pleads with Saul. Who is telling Saul that David is against him? David then lifts up the piece of robe to show Saul that David had foregone to the opportunity to kill Saul.

To the reader of the book of Samuel, David's sparing of Saul isn't really all that surprising. When Samuel had come to anoint God's choice for the next king of Israel, God had passed on the good-looking older brother, and instead chose young David. God told Samuel, "for the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7).

What is surprising is that Saul, in a rare moment, expresses his own remorse. "You are more righteous than I!" he exclaims. "When a man finds his enemy," Saul says, "does he let him get away unharmed?" If the man is David, the answer is yes, at least on this occasion. At other times, forgiveness seems a long way from David's heart.

Before they part ways, Saul asks a favor from David. Saul seems to know where this confrontation is headed, saying, "I know that you will surely be king . . . now swear to me by the LORD that you will not kill off my descendants or wipe out my name from my father's family." David gives his oath to Saul and the two men head back to their war.

A forgiving heart

It's tempting to look at David's heart in this story and say to ourselves, "God chose David for his heart, but I just don't think that such a heart beats in my chest." That would be a mistake. A forgiving heart is God's desire for us all . . . and his gift. Jesus' call for us to forgive not once or twice but "seventy times seven" is not an impossible ideal. It is just

living out the heart that God created in us when we were born anew in Christ. God's Spirit peels away the long-encrusted layers of cherished wrongs that burden our hearts. Time and again Paul says to the believers, be who you are . . . you are new creations.

But how can we bear the fruit of God's work in us, we ask? How can we bold like Rahab, obedient like Abraham, forgiving like David? The "how" is not to be found in a five-step program or the latest techniques for living a better life. There are no shortcuts or quick fixes. Rather, the "how" is found in the holy habits that Christians have been practicing for two thousand years: inviting, worshiping, learning, praying, caring, giving, and serving. God's Spirit uses these habits to cultivate Christlikeness in us. The only question is whether we will do our part, for we know that God will do his.

David and Jonathan

There is no more enduring and poignant depiction of friendship in the Bible than the friendship of David and Jonathan, the son of King Saul. Centuries ago, La Rochefoucauld wrote, "However rare true love may be, it is less so than true friendship. . . A true friend is the greatest of all blessings . . ." Young David and Jonathan were true friends, their souls bound together in covenant relationship. Their bonds of friendship would transcend family, tragedy, and even death.

Jonathan, Saul's son, first met David soon after his victory over Goliath and the Philistines. Like so many others during David's long life, Jonathan must have been drawn to the charismatic young man. We are told that Jonathan's soul was bound to David's. Jonathan loved David as he loved himself. Jonathan made a covenant with David, even handing over his royal robe and sword. It is important for us to see that Jonathan offered all this to David without even a hint of reciprocity or reward. Jonathan's covenantal friendship was a gift freely given. Indeed, this pretty much characterized their relationship. Twice more, Jonathan would make a covenant with David and only on the third occasion are we explicitly told that the covenant was made mutually. In Jonathan's gift of friendship there is no *quid pro quo*; there is no transaction. *Such is grace.*

Reflecting a friendship based upon the bonding of souls, Jonathan must always walk a tightrope between his loyalty to his father Saul and his loyalty to David. At one point, Jonathan persuades his father to spare David's life and restore him to the royal court. Later, Jonathan and David would conspire in an attempt to discern Saul's true intentions toward David (1 Sam. 20). Even then, all that Jonathan asks of David is that, no matter what happens, David would always be faithful to Jonathan's own family. At their last meeting (1 Sam. 23), Jonathan eagerly abdicates to David his own right to be Saul's successor. Not long after, Jonathan is killed in battle. It would be many years before David would act upon his promise to be faithful to Jonathan's descendents.

Though soul mates, the relationship of Jonathan and David is pretty one-sided; Jonathan gives far more than he ever gets. Patricia Tull writes, "Friendship often begins with the unmotivated kindness of one person toward another, a generous, uncalculated action offered simply from the joy of companionship. Jonathan's spontaneous love initiated the friendship and over the course of several episodes he continues to nourish it. He asks nothing of David in the present; all he asks for the future is to be remembered for the sake of his descendents. . . Jonathan stands in good company with the God whose love for humankind precedes and exceeds all possible returns . . . [Jonathan] is the friend few of us deserve but most of us would dearly love to have."¹

Jonathan could have acted like his father, working always to protect his own interests. Instead, Jonathan chose the path of friendship, covenant, and trust. He pledged himself to work sacrificially for David's goodwill. *Such is love.*

1. from Patricia Tull's essay, "Jonathan's Gift of Friendship," in the April 2004 issue of Interpretation. She is professor of Old Testament at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary.

READING WITH HEART & MIND, MAR 9 – MAR 15

Monday, 1 Samuel 15:10-35 God rejects Saul as the king of Israel.

Tuesday, 1 Samuel 16:1-13 God chooses David as Saul's successor, though it will be years before he assumes the throne.

Wednesday, 1 Samuel 18:10-30 Saul tries to kill David and then hatches a plan for him to die in battle.

Thursday, 2 Samuel 7:1-18 God makes a covenant with David after he assumes the throne.

Friday, 2 Samuel 11 David takes Bathsheba and then murders her husband.

Saturday, 2 Samuel 12 The prophet Nathan condemns David for his violence and murder.

Sermon Notes

Continuing This Sunday! *Exploring World Religions*

Taught by Scott Engle at 11:00 in Festival Hall on Sunday morning

This series is an introduction to the major world religions – but with a twist!

Join us any week that you can, as each week will stand on its own.

This week: Jehovah's Witnesses, Scientology, and more

On Palm Sunday: "Palms & Politics," an eye-opening look at the last week of Jesus' life

Spring Bible Academy starts March 31

To register go to www.thebibleacademy.com

We've got another great class line-up for this spring. There will be the usual offering of diverse, interesting, and meaningful classes during the day and in the evening. We've also got another one-day Saturday workshop scheduled. As always, childcare will be provided. Please join us . . . and register soon.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Lots of stories. The Bible is filled with them. Why? Couldn't God just tell us what we are and aren't supposed to do? Couldn't God just explain who he is? The stories are so confusing at times, complex and ambiguous. Yet, the Bible is the book that God in his wisdom has given to us. He asks us to trust that it is the right book, that the best way to know God, his work, and ourselves is through these stories. It is certainly true that we can step into the stories in a way that we could never enter a book of rules or essays.

So try stepping into this story. Read the whole story in chapter 24 of 1 Samuel. Read it in a couple of translations, even Peterson's paraphrase, *The Message*. Then, begin by imagining that you are Saul. Why do you go into the cave? What are you thinking about? What's your reaction when David calls out from the mouth of the cave? Are you really remorseful for chasing David? Why don't you stop? Why do you ask David for a favor? What is it? Why are you worried about your family and name if you are killed? What are you thinking as you leave the area to return to your army?

Then imagine yourself as one of David's soldiers. How excited are you to see Saul walk into the cave where you are hiding? Describe your emotions. How would you explain such a "coincidence"? How do you feel when David stops you from taking advantage of the situation and killing Saul? What do you think of David now?

Finally, imagine that you are David. Why crawl up and cut off a piece of Saul's robe? Then why so much remorse over it? Why not simply eliminate your rival, the man who is trying to kill you? After all, God has anointed you the king of Israel. Couldn't this be the God-given means by which you are supposed to assume the throne? And then why call out to Saul from the cave entrance? What are you really hoping to gain? Why grant the favor?

Finally, ask yourself this. What do you see of Christ in this story? Are there any glimmers of the gospel in this story from a millennium before Jesus?