

A Friend in Deed

7th Weekend of Easter – May 27/28, 2006

Sermon Background Study

2 Samuel 1:1-16 (NRSV)

After the death of Saul, when David had returned from defeating the Amalekites, David remained two days in Ziklag. ²On the third day, a man came from Saul's camp, with his clothes torn and dirt on his head. When he came to David, he fell to the ground and did obeisance. ³David said to him, "Where have you come from?" He said to him, "I have escaped from the camp of Israel." ⁴David said to him, "How did things go? Tell me!" He answered, "The army fled from the battle, but also many of the army fell and died; and Saul and his son Jonathan also died." ⁵Then David asked the young man who was reporting to him, "How do you know that Saul and his son Jonathan died?" ⁶The young man reporting to him said, "I happened to be on Mount Gilboa; and there was Saul leaning on his spear, while the chariots and the horsemen drew close to him. ⁷When he looked behind him, he saw me, and called to me. I answered, 'Here sir.' ⁸And he said to me, 'Who are you?' I answered him, 'I am an Amalekite.' ⁹He said to me, 'Come, stand over me and kill me; for convulsions have seized me, and yet my life still lingers.' ¹⁰So I stood over him, and killed him, for I knew that he could not live after he had fallen. I took the crown that was on his head and the armlet that was on his arm, and I have brought them here to my lord."

¹¹Then David took hold of his clothes and tore them; and all the men who were with him did the same. ¹²They mourned and wept, and fasted until evening for Saul and for his son Jonathan, and for the army of the LORD and for the house of Israel, because they had fallen by the sword. ¹³David said to the young man who had reported to him, "Where do you come from?" He answered, "I am the son of a resident alien, an Amalekite." ¹⁴David said to him, "Were you not afraid to lift your hand to destroy the LORD's anointed?" ¹⁵Then David called one of the young men and said, "Come here and strike him down." So he struck him down and he died. ¹⁶David said to him, "Your blood be on your head; for your own mouth has testified against you, saying, 'I have killed the LORD's anointed.'"

It is easy to underestimate the power of God's grace. We do it all the time. Today's story of David and Saul gives us glimpse into the possible.

You'd think that since we are spending a whole year reading through the Bible, it wouldn't go by so fast. Yet, in just the last week, we've gone from David's friendship with Jonathan to Saul's death to David's kingship and his covenant with God. We've even thrown in Paul's letter to the Christians in Philippi and assorted passages from the book of Proverbs.

This presents a problem for those of us who are writing about and preaching on a single passage from the week's readings. There is so much – how can one possibly choose? But choose we must, so today we consider the story of a very unexpected, seemingly impossible friendship – David's friendship for Saul. But to really understand the unexpectedness of today's passage, in which David weeps for Saul, we have to go back to the beginning of their story.

God's anointed

When God agrees that the people can have the king that they've demanded, he instructs Samuel to anoint a rather average man from the tribe of Benjamin, the smallest of the twelve tribes. Saul soon proved to be a big disappointment, rather quickly disobeying God (1 Samuel 13) and refusing to acknowledge his need for forgiveness.

The Book of Samuel

The books of 1 and 2 Samuel are actually one long literary work. Ancient Hebrew scrolls couldn't hold the entire book of Samuel, so the book was copied onto two scrolls. This is true of the book of Kings and the book of Chronicles as well. However, it is not true of New Testament books such as 1 and 2 Corinthians or 1 and 2 Thessalonians which are all different letters written by the apostle Paul.

The book of Samuel tells the story of Israel's transition from the rule of judges to a monarchy roughly 1,000 years before Jesus. During the time of the judges, the Israelites were organized into a loose confederation of the twelve tribes. Though God was to be the king of the Israelites, the people demanded a human king like everyone else had. Samuel warned the people that they didn't understand the consequences of their demand for a king, but the people would not relent and God let them have a king. The first was Saul. Under Saul, and then David, and then Solomon the twelve tribes were organized into a monarchy with centralized wealth and military power.

Not only do kings emerge in Israel during this time, but also prophets. Israel's kings would not have the absolute freedom typical of kings in the ancient near east. Instead, the kings of Israel were subject to God and to the covenant. Israel's prophets would hold the kings (and the people!) to account. The prophet Samuel brought God's word to King Saul. Nathan did the same for David.

When God decides that another king will have to be chosen, Samuel is led to the household of Jesse where he meets a young shepherd named David. God instructs Samuel to anoint David as the next king of Israel. Of course, neither Saul nor the people know anything about this. Saul meets the young man when David is brought to Saul's court to play music for him. We are told that Saul "loved him greatly" (1 Samuel 16:21) and David entered Saul's service.

Sadly, Saul began a slow descent into madness. Not long after David's defeat of Goliath, Saul tried to kill David with a spear. Saul felt increasingly threatened by David, who had done nothing to Saul but lead his armies to victory.

By the time we get to Saul's death, all of Israel and even her neighbors knew that Saul's "competition" was David. The Amalekite who comes to David in today's passage bearing the dead king's crown and armlet believes that he is bringing David good news. But the Amalekite is an opportunist and probably a liar.¹ Certainly, much of the world would sympathize with the Amalekite. Saul's death clears the way for David to finally ascend to the throne for which God had anointed him long before. The Amalekite expects a reward for eliminating David's political opponent.

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, which was a neutral location belonging to none of the twelve tribes, and made it his capital. He brought the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem. His son, Solomon, would build God's temple there. Later, Solomon, would take Israel to its zenith of military power and wealth, but Solomon also sowed the seeds of Israel's division into two kingdoms.

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 Old Testament. It is as if the writers and editors of the Hebrew Scriptures devoted their best and most poignant story-telling to the story of David, from his defeat of Goliath to his affair with Bathsheba to the tragedy of his son, 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. The book of Chronicles leaves it out. In it we see the story of a powerful man who yielded to temptation, eventually arranging the murder of his pregnant lover's husband. Later, David would fail his own overambitious sons. Such stories reassure us that even David, anointed by God, could make terrible choices against God and others, and yet remain within God's loving, gracious grasp.

But the Amalekite understands neither God nor David. Though Saul, as his madness overwhelmed him, had repeatedly tried to hunt down and kill David, he had spared Saul's life, not once but twice. In Saul's son, Jonathan, David had found a friend to whom his soul was bound (see 1 Samuel 18). David would always acknowledge that Saul was God's anointed.

Grief and commitment

The Amalekite had expected a celebration from David, but instead David responds in unreserved and sincere grief – tearing his clothes, weeping, and fasting. David grieves for himself, for Jonathan, and all of Israel. Things may have been headed this way for a long time, but the death of God's anointed is only an occasion for grief. Yes, good things will come of David's ascension to the throne, but Saul's story is still a tragedy, and David is right in the middle of it.

David's friendship toward Saul would continue after Saul's death. Though Saul's son, Ishbaal, tried to keep the throne of Israel in Saul's family, David would not allow Ishbaal to be humiliated after he was assassinated in his own home. Still later, David would look after Saul's grandson, Mephibosheth.²

I wouldn't hazard a guess about the feelings David had toward Saul. Perhaps, David could remember the good beginning of their relationship even as everything came apart. But I do see in David a friendship toward Saul and his family that is grounded in grace, in grace-filled deeds – that is a reflection of David's gracious God.

¹The Amalekite's story of Saul's death does not square with what we were told a chapter before. The simplest explanation is that the Amalekite came across Saul's dead body and looted it. He then takes credit for putting an end to David's rival, sure that David will be pleased and will reward him. Instead, David orders the Amalekite killed saying, "your own mouth has testified against you, saying, 'I have killed the LORD's anointed.'"

²The story of Mephibosheth was the subject of the July 10, 2005, Sermon Background Study entitled "Out of Hiding." The May 2, 2004 study, "Soul Mates," took a closer look at the story of David and Jonathan. The October 10, 2004, study, "Growing for Ministry," examined God's call of the boy Samuel to the vocation of a prophet. These studies and all the rest are available for downloading at www.standrewccl.org. You can use the "find" feature in your browser to search the list of studies for ones on specific passages and books of the Bible. This week's study is the 200th study I've written and they are all available on-line – all 320,000 words or so!

Thru the Bible Daily Bible Readings

May 28 – June 3

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help.
Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 A day for reflection and catching up</p>	<p>Day 2 A day for reflection and catching up</p>
<p>Day 3 A day for reflection and catching up</p>	<p>Day 4 A day for reflection and catching up</p>
<p>Day 5 2 Samuel 8-10; Psalm 72 David's wars and his kindness toward Saul's grandson, Mephibosheth</p>	<p>Day 6 2 Samuel 11-13; Psalm 73 David's adultery with Bathsheba; the rape of Tamar and Absalom's revenge – things have gone terribly wrong in David's family</p>
<p>Day 7 2 Samuel 14-17; Psalm 74 The story of Absalom's rebellion against David, his father</p>	

Sermon Notes

May Book Recommendation

***Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense*, by N.T. Wright**

Even a casual reader of these studies has probably noticed how foundational Bishop Wright is to my work and my understanding of God, Jesus, and the Bible. A couple of months ago, Bishop Wright released a new book that I will recommend first to anyone, *Simply Christian: Making Sense of Christianity*. This is an introduction to Christianity unlike any you've read. Wright makes the case for the Christian claims and explains in simple, yet beautiful, prose the story we tell about God and his creation.

I hope you will find time this summer for Bishop Wright's book. It is both an easy and a thought-provoking read. I'm pretty sure that you will never see your faith in quite the same way again.

***Inspiration*, the St. Andrew Bookstore, has copies of the CD recordings of a two-week class on *The Da Vinci Code* that Scott recorded in 2004. This is a two-CD set and costs \$5.**

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Before moving to the relationship between Saul and David, you might begin by talking about your knowledge of David. With what stories from the life of David are you most familiar? What do these stories have in common, if anything? Are they the stories of the heroic David who slew Goliath or are the stories of the flawed David or the stories of the devout David? What has most surprised you the most about David as you've read through the book of Samuel? I've heard people opine that we humans are basically pretty simple, uncomplicated creatures. David was certainly anything but simple. Do you think that David's complexity is indicative of us all? Are we as complicated creatures as David?! If you could ask David one question, what would it be?

I hesitate to call David's relationship with Saul a friendship. It certainly isn't like any friendships I've had. Yet, in these many stories, I see David behaving toward Saul as a person would behave toward a friend – or, at least, as we ought to behave. David does not repay hurt with hurt, nor does he seek revenge for Saul's pursuit of him. He weeps over Saul's death, respects Saul's son who tries to keep the throne away from David, and even cares for Saul's grandson. These are stories of grace. David had nothing to gain in a worldly sense from his kindness toward Saul, but David, being a man after God's own heart reflects God's own grace. David is not necessarily a friend in feelings, but he is certainly toward Saul in his deeds. This is a profound biblical insight about the nature of love. True love, true friendship, has much more to do with our actions, than our feelings. Are there stories from your own life in which loving actions were evident even when the feelings were not?