

God Sees the Heart

Well, this is, it seems to me, a mostly familiar story. I certainly remember the broad outlines of it from my childhood, although a few of the details might have escaped my notice, as so often seems the case with stories from the Bible. There is, for example, Samuel's sadness at the failure of Saul, which seems odd when we consider that Samuel was "displeased" as chapter 8 of this book tells us, when the elders of Israel demanded that he appoint a king over them. Indeed, it was Samuel who rebuked Saul and told him of God's judgment against him when Saul twice ignored the commands of God. But still, when Samuel realized that Saul's career was indeed irrevocably ruined, Samuel grieved. Samuel's sorrow is a good example of the compassion of one who dedicates their life to Yahweh, a compassion that we will see played out again as we dig deeper into this story and its meaning.

I had also forgotten or never noticed, that there is a great deal of fear early in this story. Samuel is afraid of retribution from Saul. The elders of Bethlehem are made afraid by the arrival of Samuel. Bethlehem was a small and unimportant place in that day. For Samuel, the great judge of Israel to show up unannounced suggested two things to the town elders, neither of them good. Either he was there at the behest of King Saul to administer some sort of punishment for an unnamed failing of their town, or he was there without the wishes of the King, in which case he might be considered in rebellion and they might be caught in the middle. It is revelatory of just how out of joint the times were in Israel that the appearance of this great man of God should be the cause of fear rather than rejoicing.

And so we begin with a people who have rejected the direct rule of God and turned to a monarchy in imitation of their neighbors. They have, as Samuel prophesied, suffered for this decision, for a strongman dictator can cause problems for the people just as easily as he solves them. And among this fear-struck people, who are rapidly learning that there is no security in strength of horses and chariots, we find God's true servant, grieving for the people and their troubled king.

The rest of the story is the familiar part. Jesse parades his six oldest sons in front of Samuel and Samuel waits to hear from God which one of the boys will be the new King. Samuel assumes it will be Eliab, the eldest. The first son, after all, was especially honored in that society. The first-born was given a double portion of his father's goods. Leadership of the family was passed on to the first-born. The oldest would be expected to be the most mature, the most experienced, the wisest of the family. Besides which, Eliab was a tall, good-looking young man, just as Saul had been. If that sounds like flimsy criteria for leadership, consider that studies show that most top executives tend to be "tall, dark, and handsome." Of course, there is also the fact that in two-thirds of U.S. Presidential elections, the taller candidate has won the popular vote. So we shouldn't be so quick to judge Samuel's assumption that the mantle of leadership would fall on the son who looked like a king.

But as God reminds Samuel, "the Lord sees not as humankind sees; you look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart." And so, the youngest son, David, is called in from watching the sheep. He's a good-looking kid, but just a kid. Scholars

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estimate his age at anywhere between 10 and 15. So imagine everyone's surprise when Samuel gets the word: "Arise, anoint him; for this is he." Samuel anoints David as the next king, right there "in the midst of his brothers," the scripture says, and can't you imagine what they were thinking? He is, at the very least, an unexpected hero. Then Samuel picked up and went home, leaving the family of Jesse, no doubt, with all sorts of unanswered questions.

Maybe we've got some unanswered questions, too. If God judges by the heart, just what was it in the heart of this young man that caused God to judge him worthy of leading God's people? What attribute or combination of attributes made David the shepherd boy not only a king, but one of the great heroes of the people of Israel and of the Church? What made Samuel predict about him that he would be a man after God's own heart?

We learn a number of things about David's character as we read his story in the books of I & II Samuel and I Kings and then again in I Chronicles. Again, most of David's story is familiar to us from Bible stories we've heard in Sunday School or at home from the time we were small. Certainly most of us will remember the stories of David and Jonathon. If you've forgotten, Jonathon was the son of Saul and although Saul grows to hate David and warns Jonathon that David will supplant him, David and Jonathon are best friends, devoted to each other. Throughout their lives, from the first day David comes to Saul's palace, David and Jonathon treasure each other's company, fight for each other, protect each other. By rights, according to the way our world normally works, these two should have been bitter rivals, looking for any chance to discredit the other in the eyes of the people, spoiling for a fight. But when circumstances do put them on opposite sides of the battle for the throne and Jonathon is killed leading an army against the Philistines, David is heartbroken. David is a faithful friend when it might well have been to his advantage to go after Jonathon tooth and claw. I know some of you, as I, love to sing that wonderful old hymn, "Great is Thy Faithfulness." The Bible speaks again and again of the faithfulness of our loving God. In his faithful love of Jonathon, David shows that his heart is after God's.

During the long struggle with Saul for control of the kingdom, David has at least two opportunities to slay his enemy when he catches him unawares. But David does not do so and he orders his men not to do so. "The Lord forbid that I should put forth my hand against the Lord's anointed," David says on both occasions. As the anointed King, Saul has been consecrated to serve God. Even though he has failed and David has been anointed to be his successor, Saul still belongs to God in David's eyes and David will not assume the prerogative of God to deal with God's servant. For all that he will be king, David understands that he is not God, a very important distinction at a time and in a part of the world when monarchs were considered to be divine. David shows his respect for God and his place in God's plan, as well as Saul's. David's heart is not puffed up to an inappropriate sense of his own importance. Instead, his heart is after God's.

David's character shows another curious anomaly for a king in his time and place. While he is a highly successful war leader, a great and inspiring general and a fierce warrior, he does not ultimately rely on his own strength or that of his army. Remember, this is the

same David who first came to his nation's attention by slaying the Philistine giant, Goliath, when he was just a teenager. He later arouses Saul's enmity when the women who meet Saul and David returning home from a victory over the Philistines sing, "Saul has slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands." David is no pacifist. But he is also credited with writing our Psalm this morning, a plea to the Lord to help in a time of trouble, presumably when the enemy was on the attack. In the Psalm, David forthrightly asserts that it is not armies that will save him and Israel from their enemies. "Some call on chariots, some on horses," he says — citing his time's equivalent of the major components of a campaign of "shock and awe" — "but we on the name of Yahweh our God." Those who rely on their own strength and devices, he predicts, will crumble and fall, but those who trust God will rise and thrive. Even at a point when David should have been most confident in his own gifts, his heart turns to God.

David's great love for God even caused him to be ridiculed but he didn't care. In the sixth chapter of II Samuel, we find the story of David bringing the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem. As the procession reaches his capital, David is overwhelmed with joy. He celebrates this sign of the Lord's favor with all the power of his athletic body, stripping down to his skivvies so he can dance and whirl with his limbs unencumbered. II Samuel says, "David danced before the Lord with all his might." His wife Michal, Saul's daughter, was scandalized. "How the king of Israel honored himself today," she says to him, "uncovering himself today before the eyes of his servants' maids, as one of the vulgar fellows shamelessly uncovers himself!" In her eyes, David has forgotten the propriety and dignity of a king and performed just like a street entertainer. But David is unashamed. "It was before the Lord," he says, reminding her of God's great favor to him. "I will make merry before the Lord." When David's heart is moved with his great love for God and his knowledge of God's love for him, he doesn't care who knows it.

Things didn't always go smoothly for David, God's anointed though he might be. Some of his sons, led by his favorite, Absalom, rose against him and succeeded in deposing and exiling him for a time. Eventually, the revolt was put down, Absalom slain and David restored to the throne. It is his reaction to the death of his traitorous son that helps me understand why David was called a king after God's own heart. In chapter 18 of II Samuel, we find that when a soldier brought David news of his son's death, news the soldier expected to be greeted with rejoicing, "the king was deeply moved, and went up to the chamber over the gate, and wept; and as he went, he said "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would that I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!" In David's grief, we see a perfect picture of our loving God, grieving for us as we are in revolt against him, willing to lay down everything and die for us, so that we may live.

Of course, David was far from perfect. This is the same king, after all, who ordered the death of one of his own generals to cover up the fact that David had been having an affair with his wife. But when David is confronted with his sins by the prophet Nathan, he again shows the trueness of his heart. He confesses his sin and, in a beautiful Psalm, expresses his repentance. Psalm 51 says, in part, "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.

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Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me... Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow... Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.” When David realizes that he has not only sinned against a comrade, but that he has ruptured his relationship with Yahweh, he cannot rest until he has pleaded with God that his heart should once again follow after the heart of God. David repents because he hungers and thirsts after God and God’s righteousness.

There’s one other story of David, of David in his youth, that makes the connection for me between David’s heart and God’s heart. When David is trying to convince Saul to let him fight against Goliath, he tells Saul some stories about his youthful exploits as a shepherd. On two occasions, once with a lion and once with a bear, young David had rescued a helpless lamb from a fierce predator. In protecting the weak against the strong at great personal risk to himself, David says he relied upon the protection of God. At his best, nothing will dissuade David from doing what is right. Surely this is a heart in tune with the heart of God.

In his compassion, in his humility, in his joy and his trust in God, this King reminds us of the one called by the hymn writer, “Great David’s Greater Son,” Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus, too, is an unexpected hero in the history of humankind’s relationship with our Creator. A humble carpenter’s son from an obscure village, “he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised, and we held him of no account.”

In the Gospel reading in today’s lectionary, Mark 4:26-34, Jesus tells two parables, one of which is the parable of the mustard seed. “He also said, ‘With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.’” I think it’s worth noting that Jesus is making a joke here that might be obscure to most of us. First of all, the plant to which he refers was a very undesirable weed in Palestine. Like the blackberry bushes on our property, or the kudzu in my native South, the mustard plant would get a foothold in a field and simply take over. The kingdom of God, according to Jesus, is like a weed! But because it is powered by God, it can grow to be large enough to shelter all manner of vulnerable creatures, something incidentally that mustard plants do not do – Jesus was also engaging in a little humorous hyperbole here.

The connection to David, that unlikely hero, and his psalm is clear. No matter what our beginnings or our outward appearance, if our hearts are in tune with God and the Beloved Community which God envisions for creation, then we shall find spiritual success and growth. We need not look to what the world counts as power to make our world safe. Indeed, as the Presbyterian pastor David Ogston writes, “Some trust in shows of strength, in the parade of might, in the panoply of power. That is not how the Bible reads the

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human condition. We trust the small to become influential, the child of Bethlehem to become the maker of new worlds; the weak one who will win our hearts by the power of his gentleness; the wounded healer who will draw all people to himself not by coercion but by love.”

Whether we are as insignificant as a mustard seed or as overlooked as a young shepherd boy, we too can be unexpected heroes in the lives of those around us. Simple acts of kindness and love may change hearts and lives and bring about an impact we cannot begin to imagine. If we turn our hearts towards God and live each day in following in the way of Jesus, we can change our world, no matter that we are not warriors or kings or Senators or millionaires or any of those people that the world considers great; no matter that we belong to a tiny church in an often forgotten suburb. We are the mustard seed and we can provide spiritual shelter to all who come our way. The great eighteenth-century French philosopher Voltaire, who was famous for his criticism of the Church of his day, nevertheless seems to have understood the message of the mustard seed: “How infinitesimal is the importance of anything I can do,” he wrote. “But how infinitely important it is that I should do it.”

“Create in me a clean heart, O God,” David wrote, “and renew a right spirit within me.” David was known as the king after God’s own heart, which of course is the only measure that matters when we remember that God, unlike humankind, sees the heart and not the appearance. As we seek to follow Jesus, to do the will of the Father and not our own, may we also pray to have, like David and like great David’s greater son, hearts after God’s own.