

August 8th, 2021

1 Samuel 18:5-9, 14-15, 31-33 “Hanging Between Heaven and Earth”

“So tell me, Pastor, are we *ever* going to be done with this King David series? This last week has been awful. Fires up and down the West Coast are out of control. Greenville and parts of Chester have been erased from the map. COVID breakouts. Deepening political and ideological divides. This story of David’s life crashing down around him is getting pretty old.” I know. These are not easy passages to hear and they’re certainly not easy sermons to preach either. Again, this is why I use a lectionary, because if I didn’t, I would have stopped at the story of David and Goliath. You all know this, but if I had my druthers, I’d preach from three books: Job from the Old Testament, Mark from the gospels, and Philipians for Paul’s letters. I would have three sermons: “God is always with us, even in the midst of trouble,” from Job, “Following Jesus isn’t always easy, but it’s what we’re called to do” from Mark, and “With God’s help, the church can do great things” from Philipians. That’s it! But we’ve got King David. And King David is important for us if we’re going to figure out what happened to Israel and why we in the church affirm Jesus as “messiah.” So ...

A few weeks ago we determined that even though there’s very little good news about how David’s life is unfolding, God always provides a way for good news. Last week, we determined that it’s good to have wise counselors like David’s prophet Nathan to help keep us on the straight and narrow. But we also learned that even though God forgives our sins, we still have to deal with the *consequences* of our sins. This week, Mary read about the grief David experienced upon learning of the death of his son Absalom who rebelled against his father and tried to assume control of Israel’s throne. Why did he do this? Because David turned his back on his daughter Tamar when Amnon, one of his sons by another wife, raped her. This led to Tamar’s brother Absalom killing his half-brother Amnon for wrecking his sister’s life. After that, Absalom

launched a campaign to de-throne his father and take over as king. Once again it seems like we're going to have to dig deep to find out where the good news is.

My question this morning is, "How much of this passage is about David mourning his son Absalom, and how much of it is David mourning the end of his winning streak as Israel's king?" What exactly does David regret here? Does he regret turning his back on Tamar because he wasn't willing to hold Amnon accountable for his sin against her? Does he regret what he did to Bathsheba and her husband Uriah? Last week we got a little glimmer of hope when David recognized his sin and repented, but it seems like David still doesn't quite get it. But why do we even *expect* him to "get it?" He got so caught up in the trap that so many kings and leaders have fallen into that it's hard to imagine what could be done to repair all the damage he caused.

What's strange about this whole series of events is that despite all the damage he's caused, David still comes out as "Israel's greatest King." From the day of his death until August 8, 2021, history remembers him as the greatest King Israel has ever had. But then when you stop and compare, he actually *was* the greatest King Israel ever had. History has a way of overlooking a ruler's personal faults in favor of their accomplishments. Show me a leader who has made a significant impact in the world who's lived a blameless life. It's hard to come up with any. Of course, we in the Christian church affirm that all have fallen short of God's glory and that none of us can say we're without sin, but there have been some pretty spectacular sinners who've made very positive changes in the world.

As much as we've been picking on David for the last month or so, I think that we're a little more willing to show him some grace this week because he is mourning the death of his son. But remember, if you've read the books of Samuel from the beginning, none of this tragedy and drama should come as a surprise. The ball was already rolling long before David ever became king. This started back in 1 Samuel 8 when

Israel demanded a King. We've said it every week throughout this series: God is all about free will. God honors our choices even when they're unwise or self-destructive choices. God told Israel, "If you insist on having a king like all the other nations, know that you will experience the same *problems* as all the other nations. This will not end well."

David started out just fine. When he was humble ... when he was the shepherd king ... when he was genuinely concerned about what God wanted and not just what he wanted, things went well. But then David started believing that he had power over life and death and that he could use that power to get what *he* wanted ... what *he* thought he deserved as King. But then he discovers that he *doesn't* have the power over life and death. He thinks he does. Here he tells his commanders, "Deal gently with my son Absalom" even though Absalom would have killed him or anyone else in David's camp. But as we see in this story, his soldiers, led by the one person that David sort of trusted, killed his son mercilessly. Why? Because if they didn't, David might spare Absalom's life and then he or someone else would rise up against David and start another rebellion.

In another 1,000 years, the Apostle Paul would write in the book of Galatians 6:7-8 – "Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow. If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit." David is reaping that which he has already sown. "Oh son, if it were only me who died!" He is the star of this catastrophic production isn't he? To this day, David is still lifted up as the focal point of this story. All he sees is "my son, my son." But he sure didn't see his daughter Tamar. Or Uriah. In the end, it's all about David. "Me, me, my, my, I, I." But his story ends in pain and brokenness, so it's hard not to sympathize with him even though he brought it all on himself.

Everything Samuel said that would happen when Israel demanded a king happened. This is it. And it ends in brokenness. It doesn't end in David

being the great hero ... it doesn't end in him being glorified ... it ends in him being broken. He has nobody to blame but himself. And yet, from this point on, David is seen as the emblem of "the good old days." If this is Israel's good old days, *who* was it good for? Was it good for Uriah? For Absalom? What happens when you read the story of David through the eyes of the women in his life? Michal? Bathsheba? Tamar? Again, who was this good for?

This should be a reminder to us that "the good old days" were not good for everyone. We like to lift up the 1950s as the "good old days" of *our* nation ... the "happy days." Well, that depends on who you ask doesn't it? Was it good for black folks who were being segregated? Was it good for our indigenous people who were marched away from their lands and placed on reservations? Was it good for people like coal miners or factory workers whose lives were in constant danger because their employers were too cheap to provide adequate safety protocols and got away with it because there were no regulations? Have there been any "happy days" that *everyone* can agree upon? Help us out here preacher. Where is the good news?

The good news, believe it or not, is here and now. This place is a safe place ... a sanctuary where we can gather in this strengthening fellowship and share both our troubles and joys. And there are three important things that we can do in this sanctuary when we are facing difficult times: 1.) We can affirm that God is with us, even in the midst of trouble. In Job 42:2, Job tells God, "I know that you can do all things, and no purpose of yours can be thwarted." 2.) We can study the life of Jesus and answer his call to follow him even when it's not easy. In Mark 8:34, Jesus said, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." The good news here is that following Jesus means we bear one another's burdens ... we bear one another's cross. We don't have to do it alone. 3.) With God's help, the church can do great things. In Philippians 1:6 the Apostle Paul writes, "I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ." See

what I just did there? You *still* managed to get my three favorite sermons from my three favorite books.

Despite David's sin and shortcomings, he still paved the way for God's plan to unfold. Hannah's song at the very beginning of the books of Samuel laid it all out – 1.) God opposes the proud and exalts the humble. 2.) Despite human evil, God is still at work, and 3.) God would raise up an eternal King that would usher in a reign of justice, mercy, and love for *all*. Yes, it's been a rough couple of months learning about David's failures. And yes, it's also been a rough couple of months bearing witness to the events that continue to unfold around us in real time. But there is good news in this place and this time. Receive it here and proclaim it out there.

BENEDICTION –

If there is righteousness in the heart,
there will be beauty in the character.
If there is beauty in the character,
there will be harmony in the home.
If there is harmony in the home,
there will be order in the nation.
If there is order in the nation,
there will be peace in the world.
So let it be.