

June 14, 2009 11th Sunday in Ordinary Time
I Samuel 16; Psalm 20; 2 Corinthians 5:1-21;
Sermon Title: “Little David Play on Your Harp”

Call to Worship: from: Whispers of God

Bring to God your sacrifices of praise
And the consecration of your hearts.

Help comes from God’s sanctuary;
God answers us in our day of trouble.

God causes us to rise and stand upright
And fills our lives with new purpose.

Light shines in our darkness,
And we know God’s glory in the face of Christ.

Look beyond these earthen vessels that we are
To know the transcendent power of God.

May the Spirit come mightily among us
To heal and grant new life.

Prayer of Confession: Help us, O God, to see ourselves as you see us. We admit before you our prejudices, our harsh judgments of others, and the excuses we make for our own sin. We prefer our own arrangements to your designs for human fulfillment. We harden our hearts against those who most need a helping hand and understanding presence. O God, enlarge our capacity for truth and compassion. Save us from our worst selves to realize the best you intend for us. In Jesus’ name Amen.

Hymns: #483 Sing Praise to God, Who Reigns Above
#366 Jesus, Thy Boundless Love to Me
#357 O Master, Let Me Walk with Thee

June 14, 2009

I Samuel 16

Little David, Play on Your Harp

The 16th chapter of I Samuel is comprised of two separate stories. The first has to do with the anointing of David to become the next King after Saul. The Second has to do with bringing David, the harp player, into the King's palace to sooth Saul when he is being tormented by an evil spirit.

Lets deal with each one separately and then see if there is a message for us that can be gleaned from the two of them together.

First story: Samuel the prophet, and one of God's chosen mouthpieces is getting old. If you will remember, he began his career in the Temple as a young boy when his mother brought him to Eli the chief Priest and literally game him to Eli to serve as his helper. From that position he gradually rose in authority until that time when all of Israel was crying out to God for a King. Up to that time, Israel had no earthly King. Yahweh was their King. It was Yahweh-God who led them into the holy land. It was Eloheim-God who established them in that hostile land. It was Yahweh-God who led them into battle against the tribes who inhabited the land. But the Children of Israel looked all around them and saw that the Philistines and the Ammonites and the Jebusites and other tribes all had Kings and they pestered God to appoint a King. So, finally God gave in and authorized Samuel as a young man to anoint Saul to be the first King of Israel. But, when Saul violated the covenant with God and did not follow the laws of Moses and when Saul's sons became evil, God withdrew his blessings from Saul and Saul was plagued with fits of rage. Some called these fits the power of evil. So, Samuel gets another message from God. Go down to Bethlehem and find a family whose father is called Jesse. And God very clearly tells Samuel that one of Jesse's sons (he had a bunch) was to be the next King.

Well, this really bothered Samuel. He knew that Saul was very paranoid, and when he thought that anyone was plotting against him, he would have that person killed. So, Samuel was walking a thin line. Samuel's first thoughts were: What will Saul say? What will Saul do if he knows that Samuel has gone down to Bethlehem to anoint a new King? Samuel knew exactly what Saul would do.... Order his death. So, God tells Samuel to simply say that he is going down to Bethlehem to offer a sacrifice. Take along a fine young heifer and make it look like he was on a religious pilgrimage. So, that is what Samuel does.

Now, if you think Samuel was bothered by God's command, think about poor Jesse down in Bethlehem. He receives word that Samuel is on the way for a visit. Samuel was seen as a friend of Saul, the King, and if Samuel is coming, perhaps it is to levi taxes for the King, or to demand some tribute. When Samuel reaches Bethlehem, the Elders are quite

fearful. They did not know if Samuel was coming to wage war, or to bring messages of peace.

You see, we tend to see the 12 tribes of Israel as one cohesive group. But the truth was that they were often at odds with each other. They argued over land. They fussed over taxes. They squabbled over why Saul became King instead of someone else. And the tribe that lived in Bethlehem knew that Saul could be rather hot headed and they had often felt the edge of Saul's sword. So, here comes Samuel, seen as an extension of Saul, and the scriptures say that the Elders "trembled" when they met him and they wanted to know right off the bat if Samuel had come in Peace.

Well, the truth is that that Samuel had come with more than Peace in mind. He had come with a specific purpose dictated by God.... To anoint the next King. But he couldn't say that. Can you imagine what would have happened to Samuel if Saul had gotten wind of the fact that Samuel was in a neighboring village anointing the next King? Saul was thinking that one of his sons would become the next King after him. Saul was looking to establish a dynasty. But God has other plans. Saul and his sons had violated just about every law that Moses had established, so the rule of Saul's family began and ended with Saul himself.

I have this picture in my mind of dear old Samuel, walking stick in one hand and a rope leading a heifer in the other. His beard flowing down, hadn't been trimmed in years, wearing a homespun robe and sandals on his feet, being confronted by those trembling Elders. And in response to their inquiry, he looks back at that heifer and chuckles to himself. He thinks to himself, "does it look like I've come to make war? Are you guys idiots? No, I have come to offer a sacrifice. Come and worship with me. And by the way, your fellow tribesman, Jesse and his family, invite them to attend the sacrifice with us."

And that is what happens. The sacrifice is made. The meat from the sacrificed heifer is cooked to a nice medium rare and the table was set and the meat was slice and became the entre for the sacrifice meal. You didn't think they were going to waste a good heifer did you? Certainly not! They were Presbyterians. They not only had Elders, but they knew that a good worship service should be followed by a feast.

Now, Samuel never lost sight of his real reason for going down to Bethlehem. God had told him to take a look at Jesse's sons. One of them should be anointed to become the next King. So, all during the meal, Samuel is eyeing Jesses boys. And they were a sight to behold. There was Eliab the eldest, tall, strong, muscular, rugged and being the first in the family, a natural born leader. Yes, he looked good. And Samuel thought: Surely this is the Lord's anointed." But God speaks to Samuel soul and says: "Do not consider his appearance or his height.... The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but God looks at the heart."

Then Samuel saw Abinadab , then Shammah, and four more sons of Jesse pass before Samuel, but God does not instruct Samuel to anoint any of these seven sons of Jesse.

Samuel inquires if there aren't more sons who were not in attendance at the feast. Jesse admits that there is one more son, the youngest son, he's barely old enough to sit on the hillside and watch the sheep. The inference from Jesse is that Samuel wouldn't be interested in this young boy... certainly not King material. All he does day in and day out is sit on the hillside and sing silly songs to the sheep and practice hitting rabbits with his sling shot. No, certainly not King material. But they send for the boy and when he comes, Samuel anoints him to be King in front of his brothers. Can you imagine their amazement?

So, here is a lesson straight from the Old Testament. Sometimes we pick folks to be our friends, business partners, spouses, play mates because of their outward appearances. That is not what God is concerned with. God is more concerned with what is going on inside of a person. What is happening in that person's heart; the outward appearance, whether they are white or black or yellow; whether they are male or female; whether they have a Ph.D. or no degree at all; whether they can sing like a lark or cannot carry a tune in a bucket; whether they have two good legs and two good arms; or have a very evident physical challenge. These outward appearances are not the measure of a person. God can and does provide qualities on the interior of a person that overrides outward appearances. Now, this is important here at Altavista Presbyterian, because it will not be long until a Pastor Nominating Committee will be going out like Samuel went out. And while they will not be taking a heifer with them, they will be taking the hopes and dreams of this congregation with them. They will have a Mission Statement that will guide their looking and it is very important that they spend their time looking at the inside of any candidate for this pulpit. The key for the PNC is the same one that Samuel had.... Who is the person God is leading us toward?

Second Story: Jump forward a few months. Saul is getting more and more morose. His fits of emotional outbreaks are getting more frequent. His attendants tell him that God has sent an evil spirit to torment him. They suggest that a musician be brought in to sooth Saul's troubled spirit. Isn't that interesting. Down through the ages it has been widely known that people who are beset by emotional disorders can be soothed and calmed by music. We know this is true of people with Alzheimer's. Sometimes a person in the later stages can get so irrational that they are almost beside themselves. They become agitated. But put on a CD with some old time music, some blue grass, or country, or classical or gospel and you can see an immediate change in spirit. We've experienced this in our own family. Perhaps you have in your family. Music can be the great soother of the troubled spirit.

So, it is decided that a harp player is sought and guess what? Someone at the court of Saul knows of a son of Jesse who is quite good with the harp. Now the interesting thing about this story is how it is just opposed over against the earlier story. We the readers know something that Saul does not know. Would Saul have consented to bring little David into his court if he had known that David had already been anointed by Samuel to become the next king. That would be like inviting the fox to come into the hen house and sing songs for the hens.

Before we go much further I feel the need to stop and deal with something that Saul's attendants expressed. "See, an evil spirit from The Lord is tormenting you." Today we understand that God is not the author of evil. Today we understand that mankind brings much of the evil of the world of ourselves. It is not God's doing. Perhaps God sits back and lets us destroy ourselves. He allows us the freedom of making decisions, but he also allows us to undergo the results of our bad decisions. But since the time of Christ, we have come to understand that God does not cause evil to fall on anyone. Whether it is cancer, or the loss of a child, or the destruction of a marriage, or the disincorporation of our economic foundations. God simply does not do evil. It is against our understanding of everything that is a loving and just God. God did, however, remove his blessing from Saul, and as a result of Saul's own actions and the evil of his sons, Saul suffered emotional and mental torment. Those attendants simply did not understand God as we now know God. We live post Christ and have a fuller understanding of God's Love and Grace.

Now, back to the story. Jesse complies immediately when the messengers come to him requesting that his son, David, come to court and bring his harp. And so Jesse sends his son along with some provisions, bread, wine and a goat up to the court of Saul. Evidently Jesse thought this was going to be a two or three day gig. But David fits in well with the daily grind of the court. He not only plays for the King to sooth his fits, but he becomes an armor bearers, and the scriptures tell us that Saul the King liked David very much. So, he sends a message off to Jesse and asks him if David can remain in the King's service." And our story ends with David soothing Saul's spirit when the evil spirits came upon him.

So, what do we glean from this story. Well, young people might find in it an acknowledgement that youngsters can do great things for God. If the scholars are correct, David was about 14 years old when he went to serve in Saul's household. Don't let your age dictate what you think you can or cannot do for God. Older folks might find a message here about what we want our children to become. How many of us want our children to become Doctors and Lawyers and Research Chemists and College Professors. I know that the decision to become a minister in the Church of Christ is a very personal one, but perhaps we parents and grandparents need to be willing to suggest to a child that they could be extremely valuable to God as a minister of word and sacrament. We need to be like Jesse who did not hesitate to send his son to do God's work in the court of Saul, and even sent along the material things he would need to be successful. And perhaps it suggests to us as a congregation that we need to be looking around the congregation to see what youth God has anointed for service in God's Kingdom. And then we back that up with scholarships and grants. I know that I would never have made it through college if my home church had not had a student loan program. And for those entering the ministry one year's loan was forgiven for each year of service that was spent as a minister after graduation from Seminary.

Well, we've just about exhausted these two stories. I'm sure that you could find some other messages in them that I have left out or simply not seen, but that is the way it is with Holy Scripture. In good Calvinistic tradition, we each read The Word with the

inspiration of the Holy Spirit as our under girding foundation, so The Holy Spirit can and will reveal new and deeper meanings each time we turn to the Word.

But what about the two stories set against each other. Is there a message in how they were remembered, how they were told around the campfire one right after the other? I think so! The first story tells of the anointing of David. The second tells of how as a young boy he is called into Saul's court in a life of service. Here is a possibility: Having been anointed to be the future King, David is called to do service to the very one he is to replace. We have no indication that David ever strutted or thumbed his nose at Saul, or indicated in any way that he had God's favor and that Saul had lost God's favor. Indeed, these two stories tell us that someone who has been called and anointed by God will do honor to whoever is in a position of power.

Right now, I am the pastor of this congregation. I'm called an Interim. But soon, I will be gone from here. By God's grace you will call a new pastor who will live among you and will learn to love you as I have and as Ralph did before me. But one thing I know is that things change. Pastors come and go. We serve for an appointed time and then move on. There is no place for personal ego. No place for one-ups-man-ship. David understood this. When his time arrived, he would assume the position for which God had anointed him. Until then he served. When you call a new pastor that person will know that they come to serve, knowing that some day they will move on. It's part of the territory. It is what we are about. Each of us, you and me, are given an opportunity to use our skills in a particular time set, and then we move on. Even lay folk know that some day they will move out of the way and allow the younger folk to assume leadership roles. This is a message that Altavista Presbyterian seems to have learned well.

For David, the temptation would have been to reject Saul, belittle him, make fun of him, knowing that his dynasty was not to last. But David was the servant to the end. Does this not remind you of the servanthood of Christ? Isn't it interesting that Jesus was born of the house and lineage of David. Genetic lineage, perhaps. But certainly the servant lineage. Thanks be to God who makes us all servants after the order of Melchizedek. Amen.

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