

Haslett Community Church-United Church of Christ
Sixth Sunday after Pentecost- July 8, 2007

Scripture lessons: I Samuel 13:8-14 & Luke 1:26-33

AFTER GOD'S OWN HEART

From early on, this book, the Bible, has been central to the life of Christians. From our beginnings, we've had to wrestle with it over and over. What is its true nature? How can we best understand what it's saying to us?

There's no mistaking that it's a book very different from most others. For one thing, it's longer than most. In our Protestant version, it contains 66 books which in most printings run well over a thousand pages. Furthermore, its books were gathered from materials developed over many hundreds of years thousands of years ago and in languages very few people still speak today. Those materials include a wide range of literary genres- poetry, prayer, psalm, hymn, proverb, prophecy, gospel, parable, letter, and apocalypse to name some of the most obvious.

To better understand particular biblical passages it's necessary to know the particular literary forms in which they're expressed. But the literary form that best helps us to understand the Bible *as a whole* is perhaps the best-known form. Above all, the Bible is a *story*. From its beginning to end, from Genesis to Revelation it's a grand, sprawling, complex, yet unified story- a tale of creation, fall, redemption, and new creation.

Thousands of smaller stories make up the warp and woof of the Bible's narrative tapestry. These include stories of harvest and famine, war and peace, exile and homecoming, loyalty and treachery, love and lust. They unfold in places like Babel and Haran, Jericho and Ai, Babylon and Ninevah, Antioch and Rome. They feature larger than life characters like Abraham and Moses, Joshua and Elijah, Peter and Paul. They enlist smaller but unforgettable characters like Shiphra and Puah, Gehazi and Gedaliah, Eutychus and Eunice. All of these are intricately woven into the overarching story of God's revelation.

That's not what we'd necessarily expect. In trying to understand what God has shown to us, we frequently think mostly in terms of doctrines and precepts, laws and commandments, principles and guidelines, practices and virtues. All of these are essential and helpful, but they leave out too much. Life is too full and God's relationship with us too rich to be dealt with only through them, only through pure and high-flying concepts about the true and false, real and phony, good and bad, right and wrong, wise and foolish. Left to themselves, categories like those become too detached and abstract, pale and bloodless. They miss out on all the detail, nuance, texture and color that's needed for genuine understanding.

But with story all of these come to life. Infused with story, they can connect with our sweaty brows, our dirty hands, our singing throats, and our heavy hearts. They can pulse with our changing fortunes, new addresses, winding roads, and fickle friends. They can stay in touch with all the ins and outs, ups and downs, twists and turns of our days, both our ordinary and extraordinary ones. In other words, they can speak to and illumine our life with the *living* God.

Of its many literary forms the Bible uses story the most and of all the stories that make up its one, big story the longest belongs to David. David's story moves with fresh material all the way from I Samuel, chapter 16 through I Kings, chapter 2, a total of 42 chapters. Taking into account the major overlaps in the gospel stories, it's true that in terms of sheer length there are more David stories in the Bible than there are even of Jesus. Significant reference to David extends all the way to the Bible's very last chapter when Jesus says at the end of John's apocalypse, "I am the root and descendant of David, the bright morning star" (Revelation 22:16). With the exception of Jesus, David is *the* dominant Biblical character. For the rest of this summer we'll reflect on some of the most important stories told about him.

The Bible's first allusion to David is in today's first Scripture reading when the prophet, Samuel, tells Saul, Israel's first king, that "the Lord has sought out a man after his own heart" to replace Saul. "A man after God's own heart"- it's a striking phrase that suggests something stunningly unique about David.

It seems that God not only loved David just as God loves all of us, but that God *liked* him. The Scriptures' later David stories make clear that David was indeed a powerfully attractive man to a great many people. But here in I Samuel 13 even before David enters the story we're given a heads-up that there's something about him that draws even God especially to him. What is it?

To answer that, we first need to sketch some of the main outlines of this man that the later stories will flesh out. It's plain that David is a naturally gifted and highly resourceful leader. Early on in his adult life he's forced to live off the land with a guerilla band that helps him hide out in the wilderness and fend off attacks from Saul, who starts trying to kill him. The men he leads are mostly outlaws and rogues, but David shapes them into a disciplined fighting force. They not only learn to respect his leadership and fighting skills; they also grow deeply devoted to him as a man.

David, the guerrilla leader, then grows into David the famous politician, statesman, and military hero. As a warrior-king, he transforms Israel from a loose confederation of tribes into a powerful nation, one of the most important of his day. He adds to his impressive political and military achievements great accomplishments as a poet, musician, and singer. As a so-called "man's man" he succeeds brilliantly in the cutthroat worlds of political intrigue and aggressive war, but as a sensitive and artistic soul he also plays the harp and creates astonishingly beautiful psalms. As a passionate man he's able to laugh heartily or weep bitterly, whatever the occasion calls for. And, as a man on fire for God, he can leap and dance freely and publicly in ecstatic thanksgiving for things that God has done.

At the same time, David's hands drip with the blood of so many people killed that God considers him unfit to build God's temple. His family life with so many wives and children becomes so messed-up that one of his sons rapes one of his daughters. Another of his sons conspires to take over David's throne and ends up killed by one of David's commanders.

Then, of course, there's Bathsheba and Uriah. Bathsheba is beautiful and bathing on her roof. Her husband, Uriah, is off fighting for David as a loyal soldier. David sees Bathsheba and wants her for his own. After he's had her and she's become pregnant, David simply arranges to have Uriah killed. It seems not to bother his conscience at all, until at last God sends the prophet Nathan to wake him up.

That outline gives us a fair opening sketch of this man that Samuel calls "a man after God's own heart". David's numerous and outstanding talents, achievements, interests, and energies give him a strong and obvious appeal, yet what are we to make of all of his heavy and nasty downside? With his great flaws that go so far and run so deep, why does God still *like* him? Why does God play up his story so much in the larger story of God's revelation?

It must be because David is so intensely *alive*, and not just alive, but alive *with* God, alive with God in spite of all his terrible violence, messy failures, and ugly dark side. As Christian writer, Eugene Peterson, puts it, "We're never more alive than when we're dealing with God . . . (T)here's a sense in which we aren't alive at all until we're dealing with God. David deals with God. As an instance of humanity . . . he isn't much. He has little wisdom to pass on to us on how to live successfully . . . But David's importance isn't in his morality or his military prowess (or in any of his achievements) but in his experience of and witness to God. Every event in his life was a confrontation with God."

David praises God, pleads with God, doubts God, questions God, fights with God, forgets God, and turns away from God. Yet, even at his worst, David is never *indifferent* to God. At his soul's bottom, he's always engaged with God, even when he's forgotten about or turned away from God for the given moment. Even when he's in active defiance of God's will for him, he's still wrestling with God, still struggling mightily to come to terms with what God is doing in his life.

That's why God likes him so much. That's why the stories of his life are especially instructive for the rest of us as part of God's fuller revelation.

David and the Biblical stories about him show us what it means for a human being to be in real relationship with God. From this beginning in I Samuel 13 when God determines to let go of Saul as king and to start over with David, God is *the* mover and shaker in David's life. But that fact is *not* made particularly obvious in the Scriptures. If you read straight through from I Samuel 16 to I Kings 2 you'll see that God is seldom referred to. You'll see that there's not a single miracle in any of the stories. God's definitely in the middle of what's going on, but the way that the story's told shows that in David's life, just as in ours, God's presence usually is quiet, subtle, and unobtrusive.

God is always there. God seldom if ever takes the center stage but nevertheless remains persistently active in our lives. God's ever at work to shape our possibilities and to invite, encourage, and lure our faithful response to them. But we're still the ones who have to make the choices. We have to choose to stay alive *with* God. Like David, we need to keep dealing with God, keep engaging, wrestling, and struggling with God, even in the midst of our violence, our failures, and our dark sides.

When we forget, turn away from, or defy God we discover, like David, that it's we who end up diminished. It's our humanity and our well-being that ultimately suffer. But, like David, we also discover that so long as we stay alive with God, so long as we refuse the narcotic of spiritual indifference, then we can keep having our doubts, questions, and fights with God and even in the midst of them keep waking up, over and over, to the wonder of God's great *commitment* to us. We can keep recognizing the marvel, as David says in his most famous psalm, that "goodness and mercy . . . follow (us) all the days of (our) life and (we) will dwell in the house of the Lord forever".

God stayed with David. In every in and out, up and down, twist and turn of David's ordinary and extraordinary days, in every talent, achievement, energy, and interest he ever had, through every violence, failure, and darkness he ever inflicted, and in every doubt, question, and fight he ever insisted on, God stayed with him. If we immerse ourselves in the stories of how God stayed with David in these ways it can help us better to understand the stories of how God stays with us in Jesus.

In the fullness of time, God comes and stays with us, but not beside us like with David. God comes and stays with us by becoming one of us in Jesus Christ. And yet, Jesus isn't just any one of us. He's a "son of David", and he's "of David" because David is so completely and utterly *human*. David is so completely and thoroughly one of *us* that God in the flesh chooses to be of him.

David violent, David prayerful, David hiding, David singing; David loving, David stealing, David worshipping, David killing; David with his sheep, with his slingshot, with his eight wives, and with his messed-up children; David with Bathsheba, with Uriah, and with Nathan; David dancing before the Lord.

God comes and stays with us as a child of David to show us that there's absolutely *nothing* that God can't and won't work with in order to achieve God's purposes for us and for all creation. To understand this better in the stories of Jesus, it helps if we first soak our imaginations in the stories of David, and that's what we'll do this summer.

As we do it, we'll pray that we will marvel more and more at God's fierce commitment to us. We'll pray that we will commit more and more, like David, to *dealing* with God. Amen.

Kurt Kirchoff