

Haslett Community Church-United Church of Christ
Ninth Sunday after Pentecost- July 29, 2007

Scripture lessons: I Samuel 27:1-12 & Romans 6:1-4

LIVING IN GATH

A few weeks ago, when we first started pondering these David stories, I said that the literary form of story is indispensable in bringing God's revelation *to life* for us. Without stories, the doctrines and precepts, laws and commandments, principles and guidelines, practices and virtues we otherwise use in trying to come to terms with what God has shown to us become too detached and abstract, pale and bloodless. Apart from stories, categories like those miss out on too much of life's fullness, too much of the richness of God's relationship with us. They lose touch with all the ins and outs, ups and downs, twists and turns of our daily lives.

All of that is still true, but once we finish with today's story about David living in Gath, we might wish that it wasn't. We might prefer something a lot more detached and abstract, a lot less dark and bloody. Biblical stories don't get much messier or uglier than this one, yet it still reveals God to us. How is that?

Let's begin at its beginning. In I Samuel 27, verse 1, we learn that David's determined to get *out* of Israel. King Saul is causing him way too much grief. Last week, we recalled David's famous confrontation with the Philistine giant, Goliath. Saul had approved and supported David's entry into that battle, but after David wins it Saul becomes insanely jealous.

Hailed as a great hero because of his victory, David becomes so popular in Israel that Saul can't stand it. He starts trying to kill David and keeps on trying. Each time, David escapes, and twice David even lets Saul go when David could have killed *him*.

On both those occasions Saul *says* that he's grateful for David's mercy. But after the second time David decides he can't trust Saul at all any more. He figures the only way to be free of Saul's murderous designs is to leave Israel completely.

He calculates that Saul won't follow him into Gath because Gath is enemy territory. Gath is Philistine country and the Philistines are still Israel's archenemy. David assumes that Saul won't be foolish enough to risk his own life by going among the Philistines to try to kill one of his own. It turns out that David's right. I Samuel 27, verse 4 says, "When Saul was told that David had fled to Gath, he no longer sought for him."

But, then again, how will *David*, the Israelite shepherd who killed the Philistines' big hero Goliath, survive in Gath? Won't the Philistines come after *him* with a vengeance now that he's in their midst? To put it mildly, David lives in Gath by hook and by crook.

He doesn't do it alone. At this point, he's been on the run from Saul for years and, as a fugitive, has gathered his own band of fighters who've helped him to keep Saul at bay. What kind of men are they? They include his brothers, but I Samuel, chapter 22 describes the rest of them this way: "Everyone who was in distress and everyone who was in debt, and everyone who was discontented gathered to (David), and he was their captain" (verse 2).

It doesn't sound like they're the cream of Israel's crop. It sounds more like they're a troubled group of misfits, a roughhewn band of outsiders who likely were accustomed to scrambling at the margins, a hard-edged lot of hard luck, hard timers who are probably ready and willing to do whatever they think is necessary to get by.

It might seem that God would make sure that David, the one anointed to be Israel's next king, would be surrounded only by the best and the brightest to help him prepare for his soon-to-be royal work. But remember how it was when God became one of us in Jesus. What was Jesus constantly criticized for?

The leaders of his day didn't like most of the company he kept- all those tax-collectors, prostitutes, and sinners. They weren't much impressed, either, by the pedigree of his closest

disciples- another tax collector, some run-of-the-mill fishermen and a crooked treasurer. The religious elite also thought Jesus and his disciples failed to wash their hands properly, picked grain unlawfully on the Sabbath, and were insufficiently serious about fasting.

Yet there was God in the midst of it all- instigating it, even.

But in Gath, David and his men take things to a whole different place. It's a place God certainly can't be happy about. Read the story closely and you'll find it hard to imagine how cunning, brutal, and ruthless they're willing to be.

After defeating Goliath, David, despite his troubles with Saul, continued to be one of Israel's chief warriors against the Philistines. Now, however, that he's decided to go among them in order to escape from Saul he begins trying to cozy up. He tells the Philistine king, Achish of Gath that he and his followers are ready to switch allegiances. They want to be good Philistines, he claims.

How can Achish believe that? David and his men start conducting regular raids against Israel. They bring the loot back to Achish and when he asks them, "Against whom have you made a raid today?" David answers, "Against the Negeb of Judah," or "Against the Negeb of the Jerahmeelites," or, "Against the Negeb of the Kenites" (verse 10). All of these are targets within Israel and not only does David raid them- he makes sure he kills everyone in them.

This is enough to convince Achish that David has, in fact, switched allegiances. How else could he be so bloodthirsty against the people of his own birth? Achish thinks, "He has made himself utterly abhorrent to his people Israel; therefore he shall always be my servant" (verse 12). Confident of David's newly proclaimed loyalty, Achish gives him the country town of Ziklag for his men to settle.

The trouble for Achish is that David's been lying to him, **BIGTIME**. David and his fighters haven't been attacking and plundering Israel at all. They've been raiding the settlements of other enemies that *Israel* traditionally has further south- the Geshurites, the Girzites, and the Amalekites.

And the reason they've been killing *everyone* in these attacks is to protect the lies David's been telling. I Samuel 27, verse 11 says, "David left neither man nor woman alive to be brought back to Gath, thinking, "They might tell about us, and say, 'David has done so and so.'" Such was his practice all the time he lived in the country of the Philistines." It's about as cunning, brutal, and ruthless as you can get.

It's true that David lives in a time when outlaw raids are common. It's true that in his day, human life is held cheaper and life in general is much rougher. It's likely he and his men feel they're just doing whatever they have to do to survive. And yet, the depth of their lies and cruelty is still morally shocking.

This man after God's own heart might think that he's forced to act this way, but what does God think? It's one thing to say that Jesus, as God in the flesh, instigates trouble that helps to break down false social and religious barriers. It's quite another to say that God's at work in what David and his men are doing. In fact, this story itself does *not* say that. I Samuel, chapter 27 doesn't mention God at all.

Maybe that's reason enough to give up trying to understand it theologically. Maybe we should see it simply as a story in which David succeeds brilliantly as a political *realist*. From this standpoint, David sees clearly that if he remains in Israel, Saul will kill him. He takes the calculated risk that Saul won't follow him into Philistine territory. He's willing at that point to do whatever it takes to manipulate the Philistine king, Achish, for his own purposes. He understands that if you live in a dog-eat-dog world, then you have to be willing to lie, plunder, and kill first and ask questions later if you want to survive and eventually win. That's what David does, and he does it very well. Is that right?

It is right, but only if we agree that this world ultimately *is* a dog-eat-dog affair. As Christians, we certainly *do not* believe that. The Bible as a whole definitely doesn't believe it, either, so we have to consider a other possibilities.

We reject the “realist” interpretation of the story. We’re not sure if or how we can best interpret it theologically. Yet we still can still try to read it “spiritually”. From a spiritual perspective, we don’t have to venture anything about what God might be up to in this particular situation. We can, however, still insist on a much stronger and deeper moral evaluation of David’s actions than the “realist” interpretation does. From the spiritual angle, we can see this as one of those times when David fails miserably in his relationship with God.

He fails, first of all, because he tries, as we so often do, to play God. He doesn’t trust in God enough for his ultimate security, so he tries to take matters into his own hands. To escape from Saul, he runs foolishly into Philistine territory which leads, predictably, to more trouble. As God’s anointed one, who as a boy had the faith, courage, and skill to honestly confront and defeat Goliath with a mere sling and a stone, we might imagine him to have similar faith, courage and skill to openly confront and defeat Saul and King Achish, too.

Instead, he flees from Saul. He goes to the Philistines and pretends to be on their side. He steals from others to try to gain favor with Achish. He tells Achish all sorts of bare-faced lies and carries out repeated mass killings to cover them up. There’s no two ways about it- David and his men commit terrible moral wrongs.

It’s the sort of thing we fall into when we lose track of God. And it seems we so often lose track of God whenever we’re faced with serious threats. Forgetful of God’s absolute commitment to us, we try to take over for God and cope with threats on our own. Since we’re not God, however, we inevitably become uncertain, stressed out, anxious, and fearful in trying to fill God’s shoes. Typically, this leads us to act in ways that are self-defeating, abusive of others, or both.

For example, when we’re forgetful of God, we frequently try to run away from things that threaten us, or go along to get along with them, or pretend to them that we’re going along with them, or flail at them wildly, or push, shove, and bully them, or aim outright to attack and destroy them. David resorts to several of these ploys as he struggles with Saul and the Philistines. His playing at God turns out to be especially bad news for the Geshurites, Girzites, and Amalekites. Slaughtering them seems to make sense as something he has to do just to get by. And if you’re playing at being God, then why not do whatever it takes to make you feel a little more secure?

How does this work in our lives now? How, for instance, do we run away from things that threaten us? Let’s say I’ve been wounded. My parents or other significant people in my life have failed badly in their care for me. Maybe they’ve been negligent. Maybe they’ve been downright mean or cruel. Maybe in a thousand ways, large and small, they’ve let me know that in their eyes my worth depends on something other than the fact that I’m one of God’s beloved children. Whatever their standards have been- looks, gender, intelligence, talent, money, achievement, or whatever- they’ve let me know that I just don’t measure up.

Any or all of this hurts me and it warps the way that I relate to other people now. Instinctively, I’m afraid of how others might hurt me and why wouldn’t they since I feel so worthless? I have many ways to run from the threat that I feel from them.

I can become aggressive, tough, and controlling, letting them know they’d better not mess with me because I’m ready to hurt first and ask questions later. I can become reserved, distant, and cold to make sure that nobody gets close enough to do damage. Or I can become neurotically weak, passive, and submissive in the hope of never doing anything that will make anyone want to hurt me. Or I can simply numb myself against feeling any possible hurt by drinking heavily or doing drugs. There’s lots of ways to run away.

How might we go along to get along when we feel threatened? Let’s say there’s constant turmoil in my life because of the regular wrongdoing of a family member or a close friend. Maybe they’re alcoholic or drug-addicted. Maybe they’re generally irresponsible and repeatedly unwilling to face up to the negative consequences of their actions. I deal with the insecurity this brings into my life by enabling their addiction or covering up for their irresponsibility. This means we end up chained to each other in ways to which we become accustomed and that give us

a strange but false feeling of security. These chains cause their own pain, of course, but they also keep us from the suffering we'd both have to go through if they were to get sober or become more mature.

Or how might we pretend to go along to get along when we feel threatened? Let's say I have a loved one who's dying. They're afraid of death and start pretending that they're not at death's door. I know otherwise, but I'm afraid, too, so I pretend with them that they're not dying. We both figure, "If it helps us to cope, then why not?"

How might we flail, push, shove, bully, attack or destroy when we feel threatened? Let's say I become aware that there are many people in this world who are very different from me. Let's say I become especially aware that they don't share the same beliefs about God that I have. Their differences from me feel like a severe threat. I'm afraid these strangers will either try to force me out of my faith or cause me to doubt and abandon it myself. Out of that insecurity, I lash out against them in God's name. I brand them as infidels or heretics and see them as those that God wants slaughtered. I'm willing to do the slaughtering, as I see myself as one of God's righteous warriors. If I'm a Christian or a Muslim, I can point to many others in the history of my faith who've felt the same way.

Or I see my own country attacked by such people and who use terrorism to do it. My country's mainland has never been attacked before, so suddenly my nation feels terribly insecure. Out of this insecurity, I'm ready for my country to do whatever it takes to wipe out these people. I see them and anyone I think is supportive of them as the incarnation of evil. I see my country and anyone supportive of us in our fight against them as the incarnation of good. I see my country as justified in making war against them on multiple fronts for as long as it takes. I see no need to keep track of how many innocents might get killed in the process. I see no need to refrain from torture if that will help. I'm in support of flailing, pushing, shoving, bullying, attacking or destroying in whatever way is necessary to make my homeland feel more secure.

And yet, whenever we respond to any of the threats in our lives in any of these ways, we become like David living in Gath. Like him, we forget where our true security lies. Stressed out and full of fear, we forget that our ultimate security comes from God. Our real security comes only from the true and living God, the One made known to us in Jesus Christ, the One who calls and enables us to respond to threats not with false and fearful denial, manipulation, pretense, violence or abuse, but only with truthful and courageous love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Eventually, as we continue reading all of the Bible's David stories, we find that David remembers and forgets again but remembers again over and over, that this God truly is God and can be trusted. This God does love all of us unconditionally and keeps on following us with goodness and mercy all the days of our lives. This God stays with us even when we're living in Gath, even when we're trying to take God's place, even when we're doing terrible wrongs that only make things worse.

This is the theological meaning of this particular David story. Even when we forget God in Gath, God doesn't forget us. Even when we're trying to play God in Gath, God doesn't let us completely take over. God instead stays with us; God suffers with us in all of our waywardness; God keeps working in, with, through and around us and our freedom in order slowly but surely to bring us all back in God's direction.

And how we thank God for that! We thank God, indeed, that God is God and we are not. Amen.