

Sermon “Endings and Beginnings”

Scripture: 2 Samuel 1:1, 17-27, Mark 5:21-43

Sunday, July 1, 2018

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Our first scripture reading, 2 Samuel 1:1 and 17-27, is the lament of David following the death of King Saul and his son Jonathan, who was David’s dearest of friends. It is a time of endings and beginnings in the story of the Hebrew people. David mourns the loss of these two tragic figures and sings a dirge in honor of their faithful lives as the young nation laments the death of their first king.

After the death of Saul, when David had returned from defeating the Amalekites, David remained two days in Ziklag...¹⁷ David intoned this lamentation over Saul and his son Jonathan. ¹⁸ (He ordered that The Song of the Bow^[a] be taught to the people of Judah; it is written in the Book of Jashar.) He said: ¹⁹ Your glory, O Israel, lies slain upon your high places! How the mighty have fallen! ²⁰ Tell it not in Gath, proclaim it not in the streets of Ashkelon; or the daughters of the Philistines will rejoice, the daughters of the uncircumcised will exult. ²¹ You mountains of Gilboa, let there be no dew or rain upon you, nor bounteous fields!^[b] For there the shield of the mighty was defiled, the shield of Saul, anointed with oil no more.²² From the blood of the slain, from the fat of the mighty the bow of Jonathan did not turn back, nor the sword of Saul return empty.²³ Saul and Jonathan, beloved and lovely! In life and in death they were not divided; they were swifter than eagles, they were stronger than lions.²⁴ O daughters of Israel, weep over Saul, who clothed you with crimson, in luxury, who put ornaments of gold on your apparel. ²⁵ How the mighty have fallen in the midst of the battle. Jonathan lies slain upon your high places.²⁶ I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan, greatly beloved were you to me; your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women. ²⁷ How the mighty have fallen, and the weapons of war perished! Amen.

Our second scripture reading is Mark 5:21-43. This is the second of three passages which focus on the nature of Christ’s kingship. Last week we witnessed Jesus’ authority over the created order in the calming of the sea. Today’s text gives us insight into Jesus’ kingly prerogatives and the nature of his priorities in the story of two healings. Hear now God’s word.

²¹ When Jesus had crossed again in the boat^[a] to the other side, a great crowd gathered around him; and he was by the sea. ²² Then one of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus came and, when he saw him, fell at his feet ²³ and begged him repeatedly, “My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live.” ²⁴ So he went with him. And a large crowd followed him and pressed in on him. ²⁵ Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. ²⁶ She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. ²⁷ She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, ²⁸ for she said, “If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.” ²⁹ Immediately her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. ³⁰ Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, “Who touched my clothes?” ³¹ And his disciples said to him, “You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, ‘Who touched me?’” ³² He looked all around to see who had done it. ³³ But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. ³⁴ He said to her, “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.”³⁵ While he was still speaking, some people came

from the leader's house to say, "Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?"³⁶ But overhearing^[b] what they said, Jesus said to the leader of the synagogue, "Do not fear, only believe."³⁷ He allowed no one to follow him except Peter, James, and John, the brother of James.³⁸ When they came to the house of the leader of the synagogue, he saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly.³⁹ When he had entered, he said to them, "Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping."⁴⁰ And they laughed at him. Then he put them all outside, and took the child's father and mother and those who were with him, and went in where the child was.⁴¹ He took her by the hand and said to her, "Talitha cum," which means, "Little girl, get up!"⁴² And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about (she was twelve years of age). At this they were overcome with amazement.⁴³ He strictly ordered them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat. Amen.

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Text: 'David intoned this lamentation over Saul and his son Jonathan. 2 Samuel 1:17

Let us pray. Holy and loving God, we are grateful for the beginnings that grow out of the endings in the cycle of our life together. Comfort us in times of loss and give us the courage and faith to believe the future belongs to you. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

This weekend our son Paul is in Richmond, Virginia visiting his oldest friend, Adam Luxon. Paul and Adam's friendship began in the Banana Room of the Clayton Early Childhood Center in St. Louis when Paul was six weeks old. This summer Adam is doing doctoral research in chemical engineering at Virginia Commonwealth University and Paul is a legal intern at the EPA in Washington, D.C.

While in Richmond, Paul is visiting the American Civil War Museum, the location of a sculpture his grandfather, Will Kieffer, created to honor Will's great grandfather Luther and two great uncles, William and Theodore, who died in the Battle of Cold Harbor in 1864. The sculpture was dedicated in 2004 on the 140th anniversary of the Battle of Cold Harbor. As I read the lectionary passage of the tragic deaths of King Saul and his son Jonathan in the same battle, I was reminded of the brutality of war and the anguish and loss so many families have persevered throughout history.

This week we celebrate our country's beginning on the anniversary of the adoption of the Declaration of Independence by the Second Continental Congress on July 4, 1776 in Philadelphia. Many came to America to begin a life with new opportunity and to end a life of persecution, oppression and poverty. We sometimes forget that the Revolutionary War was also a Civil War which tore families apart within colonial America. Our beginning was only possible through a difficult and costly ending. Our country's founders rejected the rule of the King of England in favor of representative democracy, a democracy patterned on the polity within the Presbyterian Church which evolved from the Reformers rejection of the absolute authority of the Pope. Twelve of the fifty-six signers of the Declaration of Independence were Presbyterian, including the only clergyman, John Witherspoon, who moderated the first general assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America. The Crown often referred to the American Revolution as the "Presbyterian Revolt."

Both of our lectionary readings this week reference the role of kingship within our Judea-Christian faith tradition. The Old Testament Books of Samuel record the history of Israel's birth as a nation and their desire for a king, something Yahweh and the prophet Samuel discourage yet allow. Today's reading of the tragic ending of Saul's reign opens the door for the beginning of King David's monarchy. Woven within the history of the Israel nation is the story of their faith in a God whose steadfast love and kindness is a source of strength, a God who calls men and women to live within the boundaries of the law, to respect one another, and to care for the poor, the vulnerable, and the sojourner within their gates.

In Christ's teachings recorded in the New Testament gospels, we learn a new concept of the kingdom of God as a way of life. Mark, through his thoughtful storytelling, offers us insight into the priorities of Jesus' kingdom. The story-within-a-story structure of today's reading has deep theological significance. Taken together, the two healings illuminate the character of Jesus' kingship, according to Harvard ethicist Mark Edington.

The pericope begins and ends with the story of Jairus and his daughter. Jairus is an official of the synagogue, a person of authority in Jewish society. By coming to Jesus publicly, Jairus acknowledges that whatever authority he possesses is surpassed by that given to Jesus. His confession of faith is implicit in his request that Jesus come to heal his 12-year-old daughter and is not without personal risk.

The movement in the story toward Jairus' house is interrupted by the story of the woman who has been hemorrhaging for 12 years (the whole of Jairus' daughter's life). The woman is ritually unclean, her poverty renders her powerless and underscores her vulnerability within society. In short, she is quickly recognized as the opposite of Jairus who is a privileged, powerful, accepted, male. Yet one thing she has in common with Jairus: she too confesses her faith in Jesus' authority. This she does privately, however, and also at great risk.

Before Jesus heals Jairus' daughter, he takes time to heal this woman and to honor her faith. *"Daughter, he says with affection, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease."* When they learn that Jairus' daughter has died before they arrive at his home, Jesus, the holy multitasker, reassures him saying, *"Do not fear, only believe."*

This interaction from beginning to end teaches us two things about Jesus' kingship. We learn that Jesus honors the faith of all God's children. It is not either/or...Jesus simultaneously celebrates the faith of both the marginal and the powerful! We also learn that the need of the marginalized and vulnerable is addressed before the need of the celebrated and powerful. The message is clear: in the realm ordered by Jesus' kingly authority, those on the fringes of society have a rightful place in the kingdom of God.

Yesterday, hundreds of thousands of American citizens marched in major cities and tiny towns across our country. They gathered to advocate for the reunification of marginalized and vulnerable illegal immigrant families...families searching for a new beginning in our country and for an ending to the impoverished and violent circumstances from whence they came.

As we anticipate the celebration of the birth of our country this fourth of July, may we never forget the genius and vision of our founders and may we continue to honor the beginnings that grow out of the endings within the kingdom of Christ whose revolution heals the sick, welcomes the stranger, unites the rich and the poor, and offers us everlasting peace.

As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.