



“We Are Your Bone and Flesh”

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***Fifth Sunday After Pentecost
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2 Samuel 15:1–5, 9–10 (NRSV)***

Without really intending to do so, Arlene and I are apparently offering you an impromptu summer sermon series about David and his development from boyhood to king over all Israel. Three weeks ago I preached about the first anointing of David, when God tells Samuel to pass over all the older, more mature sons of Jesse, and choose the shepherd boy, David. Two weeks ago, Arlene discussed the story of David and Goliath. Today’s text recalls the third and final anointing of David as king, when he becomes the leader of the unified twelve tribes.

We’re in the second year of the Revised Common Lectionary, that three-year cycle of biblical readings that we tend to follow here at Eden, and the Hebrew Bible selection in the second year spends a good deal of time after Pentecost in the books of 1st and 2nd Samuel, giving us snapshots of the life of David. David is one of the most beloved figures in the Hebrew Bible, partly because he brought together the twelve tribes of Israel and ruled a united nation longer than any other leader.

David is, essentially, the ancient equivalent of a rock star politician. And, just like many of our modern-day celebrities, David’s story is not a smooth, easy one, but one fraught with hardship, intrigue, and scandal. David seems an especially apt character to be studying these days, considering the sorts of figures who’ve been in the news lately!

One of the problems with following the Revised Common Lectionary is the fact that the lectionary readings do not give us the whole story, but merely brief snapshots of a larger text. In the three weeks since we read about David’s first anointing, he’s grown from a boy to a man, served in Saul’s court as a musician, killed the giant Goliath, become a fugitive from Saul’s court and an outlaw, served the Philistine king of Gath as a mercenary, been anointed by his own tribe of Judah, and ruled at Hebron for seven-and-a-half years. We’ve missed a huge part of David’s life, and missed the opportunity to explore much about his development from that boy shepherd into the adult leader.

Another problem with this snapshot method of studying scripture is that it tends to leave out parts of the story that are unsavory or difficult. For example, you may have noticed that today’s text skips over verses six through nine of Chapter 5. Those verses describe how the newly anointed king marches to Jerusalem, throws out the Jebusites who were living there, and takes over the city for himself. I am not sure why the lectionary editors

chose to leave out these verses; it could be that the editors were hoping to select the text in order to emphasize particular parts of the story or particular characteristics of the main character. Whatever the reason, leaving this unsavory section out says something about the way we read the Bible. It also hints at the fact that we are often uncomfortable with closely examining our favorite figures in history, especially those to whom we ascribe exemplary status, whether they are our nation's founding fathers or our favorite biblical figures. I think we prefer to keep those beloved figures on a pedestal and think of their behavior as perfect and so much better than our own.

One other way that the story of David is problematic is that it is very difficult to fit David into the actual historical record of ancient Israel. There is just next to no extra-biblical or archeological evidence of David as king of Israel, and some scholars go so far as to question whether David existed at all. Because of the conflicting and repetitive stories about David in the books of Samuel, scholars do agree that much of the David saga was probably cobbled together from a variety of sources. Some suggest the story was compiled to create an apologetic for the life of David, or, as Arlene mentioned in her sermon about David and Goliath, to communicate important values of the community. In any event the story of David definitely reads more like a historical novel—more concerned with theme and character than with accuracy in reporting history.¹

All this being said, even this snapshot of David's story can be illuminating for us today. David may be mythical, but his story is a powerful one that helps us examine—and perhaps even debunk—some of the myths we tend to hold onto in our own culture.

One of those myths is the idea of instant stardom. I have only to mention the TV show *American Idol*, and we all understand the sort of myth I'm talking about. But only rarely do those talented winners really make it in the long run. Those who do succeed are successful not merely because they're talented, but because of something journalist Malcolm Gladwell would call the 10,000-hour rule. In his latest book, *Outliers*, Gladwell explores the success factors of extraordinary, talented people. One of the factors that Gladwell discovered is that while talent is important, hard work is even more important. A Tiger Woods or a Serena Williams or a Barack Obama, for that matter, doesn't get to the top because they are more extraordinarily talented than another person. They get to the top because they put in more time than anyone else doing the thing they're good at. Gladwell calls this the 10,000-hour rule. If you want to develop a skill until you're an expert, you need to spend at least 10,000 hours doing it. That's 20 hours a week for ten years—or full time for five.

Our brief snapshot of scripture today may not show it, but David exemplifies the 10,000-hour rule. Although Samuel anointed David as a mere boy, whatever innate talent he had for leadership did not immediately blossom, and he didn't rush off to Jerusalem and become king. Unlike the latest *American Idol*, his was no rocket ship straight to fame and fortune. David spent years working toward leading all of Israel. He paid his dues as musician and soldier in the court of Saul, became an outlaw and a fugitive after Saul tried to kill him, worked for a time as a mercenary for the Philistines, and spent the last

¹ John J. Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 218.

seven years as king over his own tribe of Judah. He certainly spent at least the required 10,000 hours gaining experience in leadership.

Another of the myths that David's story helps us examine is the myth of individualism. In addition to our belief in instant stardom, we also have a deep-seated belief in this country in the idea of "the self-made man" (or woman). We believe that, no matter what a person's circumstances, he or she can rise above them, pull him- or her-self up by the proverbial bootstraps and become successful—or even rich and famous. We believe that the individual is a sort of self-contained entity that lives separate from the individuals around it. This belief leads us to think that our success or failure in life is solely our own.

Social Psychologist Edward E. Sampson, an emeritus professor of psychology at Cal State Northridge, points out that this sense of ourselves, while it is entirely familiar to American culture, is actually peculiar among the world's cultures. It is, as he says, "an eccentricity among cultures,"² and a fairly recent development in terms of human history. We are not really separate, self-contained entities, Sampson argues, but instead:

All people everywhere are necessarily interconnected with others in their social world. In other words, a relational [. . .] view is descriptive of the nature of human nature. The idea of self-containment as a way of being a person in the world is a belief without foundation in the actual terms by which all people must necessarily live. It is a lie. [. . .] If we examined the conditions of modern life in the West, we would see how much they affirm our mutual dependence and interconnectedness far more than the kind of self-sufficiency and autonomy that characterize the self-contained ideal.³

As the writer Alex Haley was fond of saying, "If you see a turtle on a fence post, you know he had some help getting up there." In other words, we succeed not only because of our own talents or abilities, but because we are part of a family or community that supports us and helps us succeed. We succeed because we are connected and interdependent. David's success comes not because he understands himself as a separate entity or because he believes he is uniquely talented or chosen by God, but because he is part of a community that looks at him as part of the family. The elders of the twelve tribes recall this as they declare, "Look, we are your bone and flesh." Part of those 10,000 hours of development has been the development of relationships with his kin, and they recognize those relationships as being more powerful even than the fact that David was anointed long ago by Samuel. Additionally, he creates a covenant with his community, a binding pledge to be their king and fulfill his promises to them.

Finally, we can't forget about God in this story. David has applied the 10,000-hour rule and exemplifies the mutual dependence and interconnectedness of community, but

² Edward E. Sampson, *Celebrating the Other: A Dialogic Account of Human Nature* (Chagrin Falls, Ohio: Taos Institute Press, 2008), 66.

³ Sampson, 74-75.

ultimately it is his relationship with God that is the guiding force throughout David's life. At the time of his first anointing, "the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David,"⁴ and at this third and final anointing as king, "the Lord, the God of hosts, was with him," and remains with him throughout the thirty years he reigned over Israel. This idea is a recurrent theme in the story of David. God's presence in David's life is constant and powerful, and David's faith and steadfast belief in the covenant God has made with him is often the only thing that keeps him going when life and circumstances throw up obstacles.

This, I believe, is the most important good news from David's story: God is with us, a powerful and constant presence of grace and hope throughout our lives. God is with us at our birth, and our covenant with God is reaffirmed through our baptism, and through our covenant in this family of faith. We experience God's presence through Christ at the communion table, and in the interconnectedness and support we know as a community of Christ. We are each other's bone and flesh. Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁴ 1 Samuel 16:13, NSRV