

I Samuel 16- 30

David and God's Dream for Us

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The Congregational Church of Needham

Our summer sermons each tell one of the epic stories from the Bible about a hero from our faith tradition. The series has included the stories of Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Samson, Ruth and Job. We have chosen the topics so that together we can learn about the historical momentum of the Hebrew people starting with the call of Abraham. We learned about the land of Canaan, which corresponds to the nation of Israel today, and how the land came to hold the hopes and dreams of the Hebrew people. We re-counted how the Hebrews moved to Egypt during a famine when they went in search of food, and how the Pharaoh enslaved them for many generations. For the last few weeks we have heard stories about the time when the people settled again in the land of Israel. Today we will hear the story of David, one of the greatest Jewish leaders, and the king who united the tribes of Israel under one nation for forty years of relative peace and prosperity.

For many years before David ascended to power the people lived in a theocracy where the prophets and priests prayed for God's inspiration and then advised the tribal leader who made policy. But the people yearned for a king; someone who would establish a dynasty as rulers did in other countries. By 1000 BCE the tribes of Israel had consolidated into one nation and the prophet Samuel relented, and decided to choose a king. Saul was the first man to take the throne. Saul's rule was a troubled one. David was always a threat to his power and Saul never trusted David.

History has favored David and credits him with establishing the united nation that the people longed to see. He built a palace in Jerusalem, secured the borders so invaders posed no threat and

established an administration and royal court that flourished. During his reign and that of his son Solomon, the Temple was built. Culture and literature thrived. Writers compiled the oral traditions of the faith and for the first time the stories of Moses, Abraham and Jacob were put down on scrolls and preserved. Three thousand years later though David remains one of the most revered and beloved heroes in Jewish history, his life was complicated, and his passionate personality was both a blessing and a curse. His journey started when people grew impatient about Saul's troubled leadership, and started to demand his replacement. The prophet Samuel went to David's father's home in search of a new king.

The Bible says that David's family hailed from Bethlehem and that Jesse had fathered eight sons. He assembled his boys one day when the prophet Samuel arrived for the anointing. Samuel admired these young men, and assumed that the eldest boy would be the natural choice to lead Israel. He was tall and handsome and wore the weight of his natural authority with an easy air. But as the prophet drew near to Eliab in that moment God cautioned Samuel – *“Do not look upon his appearance or the height of his stature, because I have rejected him. The Lord does not see as mortals see. They look on outward things. The Lord looks on the heart.”* So Samuel heard the Lord's warning and slowed his pace as he went down the line of young men. When he had evaluated all of them, without sensing God's favor on anyone, the prophet asked Jesse if he had any other sons. Only one was left, the youngest, and he was thought to be such an unlikely candidate that they left him outside to tend the sheep while the others assembled for the anointing. But Samuel asked them to summon David. When this youth appeared Samuel was stunned by his lovely eyes, fair hair and strong build. As he approached Samuel, there was something charismatic about him that was undeniable and Samuel knew he had found the future king. Samuel told the boy to kneel so he could pour the oil on his head and anoint him king of Israel.

Though David was Saul's official successor, the old king Saul remained on the throne for quite some time and there was friction between them while David grew in stature and diplomacy. Young and impulsive, David had some growing up to do. But even as a young boy, he was a strong fighter and a clever competitor. One popular story in Israel told how he slayed a giant much larger and stronger than he. When his brothers were fighting the Philistines, Jesse sent David to the battlefield with food. While he was there David heard a huge man named Goliath taunting the Israelite army. The bully provoked them and challenged the troops to a one-on-one battle. Goliath's size and fury terrified the Hebrews. David was outraged by Goliath's disdain for the Israelis, and was too impulsive to know the danger. He reasoned that he was an excellent marksman with a sling, and that God had protected him for years when he faced mountain lions, so he volunteered to fight Goliath. The giant was amused and underestimated this adversary. David approached him with a rock in his sling and aimed at Goliath's forehead, hitting him between the eyes with a force that killed Goliath.

It was a great route for the Israelites. As David began to fight in King Saul's army, his reputation grew and his popularity with the nation knew no bounds. His success in battle made Saul jealous. David became best friends with Saul's son Jonathan, but Saul could not control his hatred and David had to go into exile, leading his own army on routes against the Philistines and camping in regions where the locals supported him over Saul.

But David was more than just a brave and clever fighter; he was also a kind and decent man. Though provoked repeatedly, David refused to harm Saul. Though he had several opportunities to hurt Saul, the Bible says that David was loyal to his liege. Under cover of darkness, while fighting in the same region, Saul entered a cave where David was sleeping and David recognized his king. Though his men encouraged David to kill Saul on the spot, instead David cut a piece from the hem of Saul's cloak to

demonstrate how he had the opportunity to harm Saul but refused to. He hoped to demonstrate his loyalty but Saul felt exposed and humiliated; so he hated David even more.

The stories of David and Saul tell of intrigue and suspicion, loyalty and competition, bloody battles and narrow escapes. Again and again David prevailed in battle against the Philistines. At one point David even collaborated with the Amalekites in his battles with Saul. In the end, it was the army of the Philistines that finally killed Saul and his sons in battle. Though Saul feared and loathed David, the younger man was devastated by the death of Jonathan, and had tried to demonstrate his allegiance to his king, so he truly mourned their passing.

In those days, the nation of Israel was a loose alliance of local chiefs who ran their regions like feudal lords. When he was king, David's charisma and seasoned military experience made it possible to consolidate the tribes of southern Israel. David served as king of the Southern Kingdom for seven years before he eventually took control of the northern territory too. Having conquered the cities one by one David established his influence and cemented local loyalty. He made Jerusalem his administrative and religious capital. It was a festive day and a big victory lap when David established the capital in Jerusalem. He led a procession to usher the Ark of the Covenant into the city. The Ark held the Ten Commandments and the people had carried it from Mount Sinai. It had been with them in battle, often making the difference of victory or defeat. When he gave it a permanent home in Jerusalem, David's joy knew no bounds. As the crowds cheered, David danced before the Ark, and he was so exuberant that day that his clothing came undone, exposing the king and embarrassing his wife. When she turned from the window and later rebuked David, he asserted his intention to show everyone his allegiance to God.

David's passion was at the heart of his winning charm. But his passion was both a blessing and a curse. As king, his home in Jerusalem was large and beautiful. From the roof he spied the wife of one of his lieutenants, a woman named Bathsheba. Seeing her bathe, he thought he could not resist her and

sent for her. One thing led to another and in time she notified David she was pregnant. David hoped to escape notice and summoned Bathsheba's husband home from the front, but the man was too loyal to the troops to take a leave, and so David grew desperate to cover his indiscretion, and ordered the soldiers to expose Uriah to enemy fire and allow him to die. Uriah was killed and David married his wife, Bathsheba. David might have gotten away with this, but the prophet Nathan saw what David had done and he rebuked David for his selfishness and cruelty to Uriah. To his horror and to his credit, David saw the error of his ways and was full of remorse.

David's home was as passionate and treacherous as the battlefields he inhabited. One of his sons took advantage of his half-sister. Another brother killed him for it. David's eldest, Absalom, mounted his own army to challenge David's troops. Eventually David's son was killed by David's troops, leaving David torn between his personal grief and his political needs for power.

What can we learn from these stories about a passionate man whose life changed the way the people thought of Israel? What can we learn from a man who is still regarded as the greatest Jewish king but who lived 1000 years before Christ? What can we learn from this man whose vision of a united Israel still informs how modern Israelis today?

The story of David says that God has a dream for us. God sees what is true about us. God recognizes leadership where the world overlooks it. God sees potential where people see inexperience. God sees courage and charisma where most of us just see youthful impulse. God sees our gifts and imagines how they can be used for God's kingdom. It is humbling to remember how much God sees in us and to realize that sometimes the most faithful thing we need to do is get out of God's way. Samuel acknowledged that God had a plan for David. Samuel could not see it but Samuel did not argue with God. He let God lead him.

As you know in our church we have been living just such an adventure in faith this spring. We had dreams for a renovated building but the price of the renovation had outstripped our budget. In March when we discovered the costs of our vision, we also learned that the Christian Science Church was selling their assisted living property next door. It was uncanny timing and it was a bold idea that we should try to put a bid on this property. But many of you have expressed to me that it has felt as though God could see some promise in this new building and we just needed to clear our eyes and get out of God's way. God had a dream for us if only we could find the grace and humility to follow it. There were three bids and several large meetings, and a bridge loan and a slew of Board discussions over several months. Twelve days ago we closed on this property. There were many miracles in this path, not least of which was the teamwork that accomplished it, the thoughtfulness of our leaders, and the faith of this church.

In just a moment at the conclusion of this service I will invite you to form a procession to our new building next door. We will bring some symbols of our faith, and have some prayers, and sprinkle the waters of baptism into the rooms of that new building. We bless it today before we move into the space as a way to acknowledge that God has had a dream for our church. As we have pursued this dream it has grown in our hearts and minds too. We don't know exactly how this dream will all unfold but we do know we can trust that God's hand is in this. When the Hebrews looked back on their history they regarded David's time as the greatest time in the history of their nation. In truth it was messy. Battles and politics were the order of the day. But it was perhaps the greatest time in their history because they saw that God had a vision for them, and they let God lead them.