

IT'S A LONG AND WINDING ROAD . . .

(03/11/18)

Scripture Lessons: James 1:2-4
Romans 5:3-5

“My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.” (James 1:2-4)

I'm not sure about the “joy” part of the passage we just heard from James' letter to the early church, how we should consider our trials and tribulations “nothing but joy.” I guess I still have a ways to go in my spiritual journey!

This morning I was going to preach the third in a series of sermons about forgiveness. This was my way of trying to make up for the cancellation of the United Parishes of Southborough Lenten series this year on the theme of forgiveness. I feel bad about the cancellation—not bad enough to do the hard work of scheduling the whole thing, but bad nonetheless. I think this kind of ecumenical gathering is exactly what our community, our nation, and our world needs at this time.

I would like to take a break from our somewhat heavy reflections on the psychological and spiritual dynamics of forgiveness: the importance of forgiving those who have wronged or hurt us; the importance of asking forgiveness for those whom we have wronged or hurt; and the importance of forgiveness in our relationship with God. Pope Francis, whom I hold in high regard despite his recent lapse into denial and insensitivity regarding the sexual abuse of children by priests, has said that Lent should be a serious time but it is not to be a sad time, a time bereft of joy. I agree! And, by the way, we could cut the guy a little slack. After all, he's only human! He is also doing a lot of good things for the church and the world (at least by my standards).

So this morning let's take a look at one of my favorite Old Testament characters—David. David's life is chock-a-block full of lessons for us. He has something to teach us about the ups and downs of life, about the importance of endurance and patience in helping us face into and hopefully rise above or even transform the trials and tribulations of our spiritual journey through the twisted maze of this earthly life.

David, the little shepherd boy of the tribe of Judah, became the most powerful king of biblical Israel, ruling from 1010-970 BCE. According to 1 and 2 Samuel, David was the youngest son of Jesse. This may not be of great import, but it helps us understand the words of the beautiful Christmas hymn *Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming*:

*Lo, how a rose e'er blooming
From tender stem hath sprung,
Of Jesse's lineage coming
As men of old have sung.*

Jesse's lineage leads through David to Jesus, the Messiah who was predicted to be of "the house and lineage of David." David, like Jesus, was born in Bethlehem.

David began his journey in King Saul's court where his skillful playing of the lyre calmed Saul's bouts of irrational anger. David later became a part of Saul's army. He displayed such great courage and leadership in skirmishes with the Philistines that he became a highly respected commander.

Saul, who was quite insecure and mentally unstable, became threatened by David's popularity. This set the two men at odds with each other. Finally the prophet Samuel, who had named Saul as the first king of the united kingdom of Judah and Israel, became disillusioned by Saul and anointed David as the new favorite of God.

The path from his anointing to his kingship was a long and difficult one for David. When Saul, in bursts of rage, attempted to kill him, David fled to the south where he became a warlord with his own army of outlaws. Though he defended Judah against its enemies to the west and the southwest, Saul remained ungrateful and continued to harbor the intent to kill him. So David became a vassal of the Philistine king. Like a trickster, he played both sides for several years, shifting alliances as it met his needs.

Because the Philistine king didn't totally trust David, he decided not to use him in his war against Saul, a war in which Israel was defeated on Mt. Gilboa. During this battle Saul, on the verge of defeat and capture, committed suicide.

Without their king and military leader, the northern tribes reached out to David. As Samuel had prophesied they accepted him as king. David ruled the kingdom of Judah for 7 years and all of Israel for 37 years. He created a unified state and established Jerusalem, which he took away from the Philistines, as the new capital of his kingdom.

We can see that David's decision affects the claims that the peoples of Palestine hold regarding Jerusalem to this day. David brought the Ark of the Covenant, which had been captured by the Philistines, to the new city, the "city of David." Solomon, David's son and successor, built the central state sanctuary, the Temple of Solomon, in Jerusalem.

Under David, Israel conquered all the neighboring nation states. He maintained his empire through good organization, skillful diplomacy, and a standing army of mercenaries. Joab, his chief military strategist, was an important part of this undertaking.

The empire eventually began to fall apart, as empires tend to do. David became an absolute ruler. He believed himself to be above the law of the land. He lost a sense of fairness, of justice, and turned his back on his religious beliefs. His court became grand, opulent, and cosmopolitan. He taxed his people heavily.

David's disregard of the traditional tribal and religious values frightened his people. Absalom led a revolt against David and temporarily gained power. David, with the help of Joab, regrouped and was able to reestablish control of the region. However, like many absolute rulers, David neglected to arrange for his succession. This led to a bitter struggle within the court. Solomon and his mother Bathsheba aligned with the prophet Nathan to overthrow Adonijah and Joab. Then Solomon became the third and final king of the united monarchy.

David was a powerful leader, a brilliant military strategist, and a charismatic personality, but he was not a saint. He had his problems, his moral lapses. He was also a deeply sensitive poet and musician. He wrote many (though not all) of the psalms. As we noted, he established the royal line that led to Jesus of Nazareth, who was born in the same town as David. Following his triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, it became apparent to the people that Jesus was a different kind of king. He sought to rule not over the political realm, but over people's hearts.

There are many parts of David's story to which we could turn for guidance. The conflict between David and Goliath gives us faith and hope when confronted by what appear to be overwhelming obstacles. The story of David and Bathsheba speaks of the dynamic of inflation, of men's abuse of power and their abuse of women. When Nathan confronts David on how he betrayed his trusted general, Uriah, David repents. So the

story teaches us about the importance of owning our own sin, of feeling remorse, and of seeking restitution.

This morning, however, I would just like us to reflect on the long and winding road that led from David's anointing to his becoming king. The story did not unfold as David would have liked. He felt misunderstood and betrayed by Saul, to whom he had been loyal. However, God had a plan for David. David had a role to play not only in the unfolding history of the nation of Israel and the Jewish faith, but also in the formation of the new religious spirit that burst into the world in Jesus. If David had not endured these difficult times, these times in the wilderness, it would not have happened. The ordeals, even his sin, shaped him into the person and the ruler that he became.

This is true of us as individuals, and it is true of us as a church. God has a plan for each and every one of us, and God has a plan for this church. We are trying to become the people that God calls us to be, and we are trying to become the church that God would have us be. The way is not always easy. It seems at times to be a long and winding road. It is easy to become discouraged and lose hope. It is easy to lose sight of the vision that God places within our hearts.

As people who stand in the great history of David, of Jesus, and of the disciples, we know that God is faithful. Because of this we can live with enthusiasm, expectancy, and perhaps even the joy of which James speaks! Holy Week reminds us that our trials and tribulations can lead to new life. As people who stand in the rich history of this little church, we know that God has work for us to do, that God is guiding us on this journey and that God will bring us the persons we need to enrich our life together and strengthen our mission outreach to this community and the world.

Like David, we need to be patient. We need to draw from those inner resources that can help us endure during difficult times. God is not finished with us and with this church! We need to open our minds and our hearts to the gifts of God's abundance, the gift of a presence that can turn darkness into light, sadness into joy, defeat into victory, a mess into a masterpiece. This is the message, the promise of Easter!

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