**Daily Devotions**

**October 2022**

*10-01*

“Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people.”

— Exodus 13:22

I once heard this cute story in a sermon. I can’t remember where or when, but here it is. Three kids stood on the edge of a large field newly covered in a perfect sheet of gleaming snow. They decided to have a contest to see who could make the straightest path across the field. They spread themselves out, counted to three, and walked. When the reached the other side, they turned around to see their paths. Two of the kids’ paths were quite crooked, veering this way and that before reaching the other side. The third kid’s path was absolutely straight. Her friends asked, “How on earth did you do that?” She said, “Well, you guys were watching your feet, trying so hard to make sure they were lining up in the right direction. I just picked this tree on the far side of the field and walked toward it.”

The truth of the matter is that we can’t always see exactly where God is in a situation the way the Israelites could keep their eyes on the pillar of cloud and fire. Seldom is God’s will for us so clear. But there is something to the idea that we can’t keep our eyes on our feet, trying to micromanage every aspect of our lives so they work the way we want. That’s almost certainly doomed to failure.

What helps me in my daily life is having a particular idea of the meaning of life. It’s quite simple—Jesus made it crystal clear: Love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and your neighbor as yourself. This is my pillar of cloud and fire. Any time I am dealing with ambiguity or trying to make a decision or facing a serious challenge, I can keep my eyes on this basic tenet and measure everything against it. If my choices fall outside of this meaning of life, they’re likely not the right ones.

Yes, maybe it’s oversimplified, like the cute story of the kids and the snowy field. But it works for me…most of the time.

What helps me keep my eyes on what’s important in order to guide my decision-making steps?

*10-02*

“But Moses said to the people, ‘Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you shall never see again. The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still.’”

— Exodus 14:13-14

Main Idea: God’s call can be unfamiliar and terrifying, but trusting in God’s call can also be unexpectedly rewarding.

Moving an entire community out of slavery, and under the noses of the slaves’ masters, is no small feat. It would take planning, coordination, patience, and courage. It would take an act of God.

The thing about acts of God is that they are rarely predictable nor are they controllable. In the case of the Hebrew people fleeing Pharaoh in Egypt, God went to great lengths to move Pharaoh so that he would let the people begin their journey. It took the death of Pharaoh’s own son for him to relent to God’s demands. But, once the Israelites were on their way, Pharaoh once again realized what was at stake—his entire kingdom had been built on the backs of these slaves. Letting them go threatened economic and societal collapse. He had to act fast.

Today’s story is set at the climax of this daring escape, when the Israelites were trapped between the sea and Pharaoh’s armies. It seemed like there was no escape. But God had plans nobody could have predicted. God cleared a dry pathway through the sea. The people fled, the armies pursued, and God closed the sea over the heads of the armies, washing them away.

The people were understandably shaken. But Moses reassured them, directed them to be still, and let God do the rest.

Often, when we are terrified or too paralyzed to act, we are called to courage and patience. It’s not an easy thing to come by when anxiety stirs us to fight, flee, or freeze. But God reassures us, “You have only to keep still,” and wait for God to act. And when God acts, we must be ready to seize the opportunity to act. (If the people had not fled through the sea, they would have been captured by Pharaoh’s armies, and their opportunity for freedom would have been lost.)

Still, on the other side of the sea, the people would be faced with uncertainty and unfamiliarity over and over again. The scariest journey of their lives would require the most intentional faith, patience, and response to God’s call. It would also prove to be the most fruitful journey that would cement the covenant between God and God’s people forever.

*10-03*

“Then the prophet Miriam, Aaron’s sister, took a tambourine in her hand; and all the women went out after her with tambourines and with dancing. And Miriam sang to them: ‘Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.’”

— Exodus 15:20-21

The prophet Miriam. Say it with me. The prophet Miriam. A woman prophet. A woman who spoke God’s words, who led the other women in a song of exultation and gratitude. A woman whose song actually pre-dates the song of Moses that is recorded before it in this text.

Miriam is my muse. She didn’t just speak the words of God, she sang them. She danced them. She used them to draw others into the dance. She accompanied them with the joyful percussive sound of the tambourine to keep the rhythm and flow.

If I want to be anything in my work for Clergy Stuff and the church in general, I want to be Miriam, singing and dancing the stories of God’s unending love for God’s messy, flawed, and still deeply lovable people.

Who do I relate or aspire most to in the Bible?

*10-04*

“God said, ‘If you will listen carefully to the voice of the Lord your God, and do what is right in his sight, and give heed to his commandments and keep all his statutes, I will not bring upon you any of the diseases that I brought upon the Egyptians; for I am the Lord who heals you.’”

— Exodus 15:26

This sort of transactional interaction between God and God’s people has always bugged me. It can be so hard sometimes to square the Christian idea of a God who gifts us with love and life and salvation, no questions asked, and the God we find so often in the scriptures whose protection and care is conditional upon behavior. Sometimes we are left asking “Did God change? And if so, why?”

My thoughts? God hasn’t changed. Not one bit. The Bible is simply a record of how God’s people experienced and interpreted God through the lens of their particular context. Co-written by God, of course, but ultimately recorded through the eyes of men (generally) at a time when survival was precarious, disease was mysterious and rampant, and the people’s understanding was that God (and gods) rewarded people for towing the line and punished them for messing up.

Through my own lens (call it midrash if you will) I might interpret God’s words like so: ‘My commandments and statutes are gifts of love, and if you follow them, it will go a long way to helping you live long and prosper. But one way or another, I am the God who heals, and my healing is available to you no matter what, because I love you.’

Do I find myself re-interpreting scripture through my own lens? How do I feel about this practice?

*10-05*

“When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, ‘What is it?’ For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, ‘It is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat.’”

— Exodus 16:15

The word ‘manna’ literally translates as ‘what it is?’ God sent the people exactly what they had asked for, exactly what they needed for their flourishing, and the people were, understandably, skeptical. It didn’t look like the bread they were used to eating. It didn’t taste quite like bread, but “was like coriander seed, white, and the taste of it was like wafers made with honey.’ (Exodus 16:31) That actually sounds pretty darn tasty.

Which just goes to demonstrate that God absolutely has our back, no matter what, but that oftentimes, God’s help—God’s unfathomable, life-transformative grace and mercy—doesn’t look the way we were expecting. So we’re skeptical… Or, at least, I am. But there’s an astonishing quote in recovery literature that says, “When we look back, we realize that the things which came to us when we put ourselves in God’s hands were better than anything we could have planned.” (Alcoholics Anonymous, p.100) And I have found it to be true again and again and again. So the next time God provides something new and interesting to help me in my struggled, I’ll probably still say, “What is it?” but then sometime down the road I’ll look back and think, “Wow. That was tasty!”

When has God shown up in my life in a surprising and even confusing way?

*10-06*

“He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, ‘Is the Lord among us or not?’”

— Exodus 17:7

Just as with the manna, God doesn’t show up according to our script. The Israelites probably would have preferred actual bread, but what they God was exactly what they needed. Now they want water—and with good reason—and the fact that it hasn’t immediately presented itself to them leads them to get ornery. I can’t blame them. They’ve run for their lives from a lifetime of slavery, they’re wandering in the desert trying to survive, and Moses has assured them that all of this is God’s will and that God will take care of them. But if you don’t have water you die. So it makes perfect sense that the people demanded to know, “Is the Lord among us or not?”

And, of course, God is. God shows up not in some creek they missed in their wandering, but in water to gushing forth out of a rock.

We all have spiritually dry periods in our lives. We all find ourselves wondering, “Is God with me or not?” I sometimes find myself just flat out angry at God for not showing up when I feel God really ought to. And I quarrel and test God just like the Israelites, because I’m human and I get scared. But so far in my life experience I have found that no matter how convinced I am that everything will be miserable forever, I always find myself staring, gobsmacked, at God’s love and care gushing forth from where I least expect it.

When have I felt abandoned or neglected by God? When and how did I notice that God had shown up?

*10-07*

“But Moses’ hands grew weary; so they took a stone and put it under him, and he sat on it. Aaron and Hur held up his hands, one on one side, and the other on the other side; so his hands were steady until the sun set.”

— Exodus 17:12

Even the strongest prophets need help. They’re just people after all, and let’s be honest—the work of a prophet is thankless, exhausting, and often discouraging. Now, I’m no fan of all the war-mongering in the Bible, but if I look at it as an allegory, I can get behind it. Speaking God’s prophetic words of justice to people who don’t want to hear them is a mighty struggle. It can lead to burnout, persecution, and assassination. Despite the Bible singling out individual prophets and often painting them as isolated, lone wolves, the fact is that no one can do this work alone. Not then, not now. Elijah had the widow of Zarephath (1 Kings 17:8-16) and Elisha (1 Kings 19:19-21). Jeremiah had Baruch ben Neriah (Jeremiah 36:1-8) and Ebed-Melech (Jeremiah 38:1-16). And Moses has Aaron and Hur and Miriam and Jethro, just to name a few off the top of my head. I’m sure there are plenty more examples.

So what can I take from this today? First, if I am called to be a prophet, and speak God’s words of justice to the world, I don’t have to do it alone. Second, if I am not called to be a prophet directly, there are a million places for me to lend my support to those who are out there prophesying at great risk to themselves. It’s big, big work, and this world desperately needs it.

Whose arm can I help hold up as they speak God’s words of justice to those in power?

*10-08*

“[Jethro said,] ‘Now listen to me. I will give you counsel, and God be with you! You should represent the people before God, and you should bring their cases before God; teach them the statutes and instructions and make known to them the way they are to go and the things they are to do.’”

— Exodus 18:19-20

Moses was a lot of things, but apparently an administrator wasn’t one of them. Yesterday I wrote about how prophets need help to do God’s work, and here’s Jethro stepping up to do just that.

You see, Moses is kind of hung up on the idea that only he can speak for God. He’s got that classic people-pleaser over-committer vibe that leaves so many people in faith communities burned out and bitter. He’s trying to judge the everyday disputes of the entire company of Israel by himself.

Thank goodness for Jethro. “Are you nuts? We get it—you’re God’s guy right now. But what you’re doing is absolutely impossible and no one wants you having a nervous breakdown while they’re still wandering in the desert!”

With hardly a thought, Jethro breaks down exactly how to distribute power (all to men, of course) among lots of people who can easily handle the little things, leaving only the really big, important stuff for Moses to deal with. And each of those individuals settling lower-level disputes, if well-instructed, can be counted on to do as God wishes in their deliberations.

Our pastors have a lot on their plates. It’s so easy to want to turn to them to deal with every little detail of community life. But the fact is that it’s community life, and God is calling all of us to serve one another in that community. So we take on different roles from higher-level leadership to mission critical work that rarely gets noticed. In every case, if we are doing it with a heart for love and service, we are equipped to do God’s will in all we do. That way, our pastors are free to handle the big stuff.

How am I of love and service in my faith community?

*10-09*

“Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites.”

— Exodus 19:5-6

Main Idea: The Ten Commandments are a covenant between God and God’s people, given in love by a God who wants what’s best for God’s people.

Too often we read the Ten Commandments as a rulebook, a set of laws God pronounced upon God’s people to tame us and keep us in line. But this is a limited perspective, and it fails to honor the entirety of God’s gift here.

These are not just commands. This entire exchange is a covenant between God and God’s people. It begins with an account of what God has already done to earn the people’s trust and respect. God freed the people from centuries of enslavement. In return, God asks that the people respect God and reject the gods of Egypt. Loyalty is a small ask from a God who has shown utmost loyalty to Israel.

The following commandments are also pleas to act and behave in ways that honor God and respect God’s people. Even the scary first commandment, “I… am a jealous God, punishing children… to the third and the fourth generation,” comes with an even greater return on investment, “but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation.” (God’s “punishment” is a description, not a prescription. Anyone who’s suffered abuse at the hands of a parent knows that the scars do last for generations. God’s promise is that God’s blessings can last a thousand generations when people choose faith over fear, and selflessness over selfishness.)

God’s commandments continue to build a community that is just and sustainable. Even the slaves, livestock, and land were given reprieve from work. An overtaxed society could not sustain justice, peace, or equity.

God’s commandments were for the benefit of God’s people and a solidification of God’s covenant with God’s people. This was a two-way street. The people would behave for the better of society and of God, and God would continue to act in the people’s best interests. God’s commandments were a gift to a weary, lost people, who needed assurance from a God who had their back.

*10-10*

“Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face. He was unequaled for all the signs and wonders that the Lord sent him to perform in the land of Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his servants and his entire land, and for all the mighty deeds and all the terrifying displays of power that Moses performed in the sight of all Israel.”

— Deuteronomy 34:10-12

Moses was a big deal. It’s funny though. Growing up, I wasn’t all that aware of the guy. I mean, we read the story of baby Moses in the river, and we learned the story of the escape from Egypt and the Ten Commandments. But that was about as deep as we got. It makes some sense, being that the Christian tradition is about Jesus, and the Revised Common Lectionary, which most of us grew up with and most mainline churches still use, blows past the full breadth of Moses’ prophetic acts and few people preach on the Hebrew Bible texts anyway.

I think it behooves us to dig deeper into the deeply imperfect, ill-qualified, often overwhelmed man whom God chose and then equipped to liberate God’s people from oppression and lead them to a place they could call home. Unlike Jesus, who was fully God as much as he was fully human, Moses was entirely one of us. He’s so relatable. I mean, when God called him, he actually straight up said, “Send someone else.” To God. He argued and whined to God all the time. And even after all the “mighty deeds and terrifying displays of power” that he performed, he still screwed up so badly that he never got to enter the promised land himself.

And yet, “never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses.” Never. Not Elijah or Elisha, not Isaiah or Jeremiah. Moses was one of a kind. His story is foundational to our identity as God’s beloved children, whether we think so or not. I encourage you to wander through the whole story of Moses, from beginning to end, and notice where you see yourself in all that transpires.

What is my favorite story about Moses?

*10-11*

“I hereby command you: Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.”

— Joshua 1:9

I have a tough time with Joshua. The rest of this passage is all about how God is calling Joshua to take up the mantle of leadership from Moses and not just lead people into the promised land, but conquer it through any means necessary. God is directing Joshua to displace the people who already live on the land, in many cases wiping them out wholesale. Considering the unforgivable way Christians did the same thing in the Americas, also in the name of God, I don’t think we can gloss over this tradition in our scripture.

Historically the region the Israelites entered was not conquered in swaths as it is portrayed in the Bible. In fact, the Hebrew people trickled into Canaan, settling among the natives relatively peaceably, often intermarrying and adopting local customs. For an Israelite nation in exile recording their history, this would never do. Their story was their identity as God’s people—the only people who knew God, who followed God’s righteous laws, who did not worship nature gods or engage in other pagan practices. To record (even if they had recollection or records of it) that their ancestors assimilated gradually into Canaan after leaving Egypt could have caused an identity crisis. Thus the grand stories of war heroes driving out the unrighteous sinners and claiming the land as a God-given gift.

Scripture is all about the invitation to dig deeper, learn more, and grapple with the question of who God is and who we are in relationship to God. The God of my understanding does not advocate or condone genocide. Period. So the question for us is how our identity as Christians is a call to be an extension of God’s love and justice for all people without exception, rather than an excuse to see ourselves as exceptional.

How do I see my identity as a Christian informing my actions in the world?

*10-12*

“Now then, since I have dealt kindly with you, swear to me by the Lord that you in turn will deal kindly with my family. Give me a sign of good faith that you will spare my father and mother, my brothers and sisters, and all who belong to them, and deliver our lives from death.”

— Joshua 2:12-13

Espionage. Secret pacts. Daring escapes. A thrilling spy story if ever there was one. Oh, and Rahab rocks. Talk about a woman of higher than average intelligence. I can totally see this being developed into a novel (maybe it has been and I just don’t know it). There are so many fascinating details we don’t get that the writer in me is dying to know. First of all, did the spies go straight to Rahab for some reason? Were they looking for her services as a prostitute to alleviate the incredible stress and danger of their mission? I mean, they slept at her house. Why did she hide them at a high risk to herself? She says she’s heard the rumors about the parting of the Red Sea and the Israelites vanquishing some other people and knows Jericho’s next. Who gave her the intel? Common knowledge on the street? Clients? Family? And after she hid the men and exacted a promise from them in return on behalf of her whole family (genius!), she sent them off to hid in the hills and she knew exactly where and how long to hide. How could she possibly have known this? Did she have some high-level government types with loose lips on her client list? Did she, as a prostitute in Jericho, have some level of status we don’t understand culturally? Is someone in her family in the government?

I realize this isn’t a true “devotion” per se, but maybe I can rescue it by encouraging you to read scripture with wide eyes and an open mind, a sense of wonder and creativity, and an invitation to God to fascinate and enthrall you. Sure, not every passage is like this one, but even in the challenging passages there are opportunities for such wonder. Go forth and dig in!

What Bible stories do I find most compelling and why?

*10-13*

“While all Israel were crossing over on dry ground, the priests who bore the ark of the covenant of the Lord stood on dry ground in the middle of the Jordan, until the entire nation finished crossing over the Jordan.”

— Joshua 3:17

Once again, God parts a large body of water for God’s people to cross. The first time it was as they were fleeing from Egypt. This time it’s as they’re entering into the promised land. The stories are like bookends to the Moses story (although this one happens after they’ve already been wreaking havoc on the local inhabitants of Canaan for a while).

I have a friend who theorized that in the Peter Jackson Lord of the Rings trilogy, every time someone crossed a body of water they died and/or were resurrected. He had some pretty convincing symbolism for all of it, too. Not saying I agreed, but it made for a fascinating discussion.

Water stories are all over scripture. Moses was hidden in the Nile. Jonah was cast into the sea. John baptized in the Jordan. A disabled man was healed in the Pool of Siloam. Jesus was forever crossing lakes on boats or on foot. Paul’s story includes a highly dramatic sea voyage that ended in a shipwreck. Water is a potent symbol for God’s presence with us in one way or another. I invite you to go have a fascinating discussion with a friend about what crossing water represents in biblical literature and for us now as God’s beloved children.

What is my favorite water story in the Bible?

*10-14*

“The Lord said to Joshua, ‘You shall march around the city, all the warriors circling the city once. Thus you shall do for six days, with seven priests bearing seven trumpets of rams’ horns before the ark. On the seventh day you shall march around the city seven times, the priests blowing the trumpets. When they make a long blast with the ram’s horn, as soon as you hear the sound of the trumpet, then all the people shall shout with a great shout; and the wall of the city will fall down flat.’”

— Joshua 6:2-5

As battle plans go, this one is a little…laughable, actually. I mean seriously. March around the city with the ark, blow the shofars (trumpets of rams’ horns) a bunch of times, shout, and the walls will just spontaneously collapse. If I were a soldier in Joshua’s army, I might be thinking, “Cuckoo.” Except I’d already seen the Jordan river part. You know, among other mind-blowing miracles. So maybe I’d just be like, “Yeah, cool. Let’s do it.”

The fact is that when God is involved, the craziest-seeming action can actually be world-changing. I heard a story about a church that was dying. So instead of desperately pulling out all the stops to try to fill the pews, the just said, “Okay. Let’s just go out with dignity and in the time we have left, let’s do service.” They started working directly in the community in a number of different places. Suddenly, people started noticing—"Hey, these people are living their faith instead of just trying to preserve their tradition.” Folks trickled into worship on Sundays. I don’t know how the story ends—maybe the church did close after all. But often times God calls us to go against “what we’ve always done” in order to create outcomes that are beyond our wildest imaginings.

When have I been called to think ‘outside the box’ to address a problem?

*10-15*

“Joshua then pronounced this oath, saying, “Cursed before the Lord be anyone who tries to build this city—this Jericho! At the cost of his firstborn he shall lay its foundation, and at the cost of his youngest he shall set up its gates!” So the Lord was with Joshua; and his fame was in all the land.”

— Joshua 6:26-27

Honestly. What, exactly, did Jericho do that was so awful as to warrant its entire obliteration from the face of the earth? Survey says? Nothing. There’s nothing in the biblical text, nothing in the historical record (in fact, Jericho was probably uninhabited when Joshua was supposed to have shown up). The story is simply one more example of the narrative that God would utterly destroy anything in the way of Israel becoming its own nation. These stories are so hard for our modern ears—that genocide would be acceptable God, or that God couldn’t think of an alternative for giving God’s people a place to call home.

This is why one should never read the Bible in isolation. God calls us into community as we struggle with scripture, as we try to find gospel in the midst of unspeakable trauma. Otherwise we are in danger of taking such stories literally and as a call to violence toward anyone who doesn’t agree with our particular view of God.

Identity is important as it is a key component in a human person’s deep need to belong. But individual identity should move us toward interdependence rather than “us” and “them” mentality. The truth is that we are each unique and precious, that we are all beloved, and that we all belong to God, without exception.

How do I identify myself? Into which communities? How does my identity help and hinder my relationship to the greater world?

*10-16*

“Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.”

— Joshua 24:15

Main Idea: God gave God’s full loyalty to God’s people and asked nothing more than the same in return. God’s people had to choose: worship God or walk away.

It took many decades for the Israelites to establish a working society for themselves after God freed them from slavery in Egypt. God gave them commandments and laws to help them learn to govern themselves. God kept them out of the promised land until they had an opportunity to become a working society. Then God gave them the land promised to them. And for all this time, God put up with their divided loyalties, as they continued to worship the gods of Egypt and surrounding lands.

But the time had come for the people to choose. No longer would God tolerate sharing the people’s worship with gods that had done nothing for them. God gave them everything. God wanted their full attention.

Joshua delivered a powerful speech first laying out all that God had done for the people. (God’s requests usually began with what God had already done for the people.) Joshua showed how faithful God had always been to them, despite their divided loyalties. Then Joshua put it plainly: choose God or walk away. Interestingly, even with all that God had done and the overwhelming evidence that God was looking out for them, God still gave them a choice.

The people could see that God had been faithful and were willing to worship God alongside their other gods. But Joshua made it clear—God wanted full loyalty for God’s loyalty to them. It was a fair ask. Ultimately, the people as a whole chose God, and God renewed God’s covenant with God’s people. Again.

*10-17*

“And she said, ‘Oh, my lord! As you live, my lord, I am the woman who was standing here in your presence, praying to the Lord. For this child I prayed; and the Lord has granted me the petition that I made to him. Therefore I have lent him to the Lord; as long as he lives, he is given to the Lord.’ She left him there for the Lord.”

— 1 Samuel 1:26-28

Talk about a sacrifice. Considering the value of sons, and how the worth of a woman as measured by how many she had, how strong and amazing Hannah must have been. Even more, of course, is the reality that this child whom she has nursed for at least three years but as many as nine, and who has certainly brought incredible joy to her life, will now live with someone else and she will seldom see him. I can’t imagine the grief she surely felt even though she was utterly convinced her decision was the right one. Not to overstep, but it makes me think a little of how God our Mother/Father might have felt giving God the Son into the hands of the world for the greater good.

Samuel becomes one of God’s most potent prophets and a central figure in the establishment of the monarchy. In a scripture that so often ignores the contributions (and even names) of women, I find it touching that so much tenderness is given to Samuel’s mother. It’s never occurred to me before, but I’ve always like the figure of Samuel a great deal and I’m suddenly realizing that it’s because of Hannah. Her story is poignant and so full of love—how could Samuel not be a decent guy?

Have I ever considered how my feelings about one biblical figure influence my feelings about another?

*10-18*

“Samuel lay there until morning; then he opened the doors of the house of the Lord. Samuel was afraid to tell the vision to Eli. But Eli called Samuel and said, ‘Samuel, my son.’ He said, ‘Here I am.’ Eli said, ‘What was it that he told you? Do not hide it from me. May God do so to you and more also, if you hide anything from me of all that he told you.’ 18So Samuel told him everything and hid nothing from him. Then he said, ‘It is the Lord; let him do what seems good to him.’”

— 1 Samuel 3:15-18

I’m sure it’s bad, but I can’t help but chuckle when I read Eli’s response to Samuel’s prophecy. He’s ancient, half-blind, probably sick to death of what rotten apples his sons have turned out to be, so in spite of the Israelite culture of the legacy of sons, when he hears God’s going to pretty much drop kick them off the face of the earth, he just shrugs. “It’s God. Let God do whatever seems good.” Or, in modern lingo, “Whatevs. They totes deserve it.”

But poor Samuel. He was a child! He had to deliver the bad news to the guy who was taking care of all his needs. It says something about his character that he was willing to trust God enough to say it like it was. I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again: prophecy, speaking God’s words, is not easy. Because God’s words aren’t always what the people want to hear. Not to go back to yesterday’s devotion about Hannah, but I wonder how many stories she told and sang to him about God’s faithfulness based on her own experience. That would’ve sunk in, I’m sure. So once again, her influence is at work here in Samuel’s developing character. He’s just heard directly from God for the first time and it ain’t pretty. But he knows God won’t drop him—his mama told him so.

What’s the hardest truth I’ve ever had to say to someone?

*10-19*

“Then Samuel said to all the house of Israel, ‘If you are returning to the Lord with all your heart, then put away the foreign gods and the Astartes from among you. Direct your heart to the Lord, and serve him only, and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines.’ So Israel put away the Baals and the Astartes, and they served the Lord only.”

— 1 Samuel 7:3-4

Judgeship of Israel has now gone from Eli to Samuel. There’s no indication of exactly how old Samuel is at this point, but there’s some vague language in 1 Samuel 3 indicating he “grew up” and God was with him and let “none of his words fall to the ground.” So…twenties maybe?

His prophecy about Eli’s sons meeting untimely deaths has just come true when they are both killed in a battle with the Philistines. In the same battle, the Ark of the Covenant is stolen by the Philistines and it is this news, not the death of his sons, which causes Eli to fall over, break his neck, and die, ending his 40-year stint as judge of Israel.

The Philistines returned the Ark about seven months later (God made it abundantly—and horror-movie-esquely—clear it had more power than they could handle and they’d better give it back). But they still wanted a piece of the Israelites and so the people call on their new judge, Samuel, to tell them what to do.

And Samuel does. “Make a decision, people. Are you God’s or aren’t you? If you’re God’s and you want God to protect you, for crying out loud stop worshipping other gods! I mean, really. Do I have to spell this out for you?”

Well, sometimes yeah. We all forget, in times of stress, what’s what. And we might need someone to talk sense to us. Thank goodness for the level-headed folks in our lives who remind us that sometimes we’re missing the obvious.

Who do I count on in my life to set me straight when I’m making too big a thing out of something?

*10-20*

“Now then, listen to their voice; only—you shall solemnly warn them, and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them.”

— 1 Samuel 8:9

And warn them Samuel did. “He’ll take your sons and make them soldiers and farmers and weaponsmiths and toolsmiths. He’ll take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He’ll take your best fields and tax you to pieces and you’ll be his slaves and you’ll hate every minute of it. And when you realize your mistake and complain to God, God’s not gonna answer.”

But he people literally did not care. They just whined, “We wanna be like other nations and we wanna have a king to fight our battles for us.” As if Samuel didn’t just say the king would make their own kids fight the battles. Hello?!?

We know the people get exactly what Samuel says they will and somehow they still don’t care. They opt out of a more locally-run political system in which God is their ultimate authority and into a monarchic system in which people (mostly men) will begin behaving reprehensibly and vying for power and backstabbing almost from the moment it begins, and which will inevitably lead to a national schism and the repeated conquering of the nations by other, stronger empires.

Maybe this was inevitable. Maybe people are just incapable of governing themselves without devolving into their worst behavior. Or maybe this story, written as it was during the time of Israel’s exile, was a moment of clarity for the people—a moment of wistful regret that just maybe all of it could have been avoided if they’d just chosen a different way.

How does my understanding of biblical history influence my ideas about governance?

*10-21*

“Samuel took a vial of oil and poured it on his head, and kissed him; he said, ‘The Lord has anointed you ruler over his people Israel. You shall reign over the people of the Lord and you will save them from the hand of their enemies all around.’”

— 1 Samuel 10:1a

I can only imagine Saul’s shock. He’s just been running around for three days trying to find his father’s wayward donkeys and suddenly a prophet has told him that all of Israel’s hope is fixed on Saul, a nobody from the lowliest tribe of the people. And now, the next morning, that same prophet anoints him king. Wait. What?

Thankfully, Samuel is willing to prove himself—he predicts in highly specific terms what’s going to happen to Saul in the next day (and some of it’s weird, folks) and then instructs Saul to wait for him for a week, when more will be revealed.

I’ve had a few moments in my life that have caused complete consternation, and found myself wondering what my next course of action should be. I have to admit that in those times, it’s not usually my first thought to ask God about it. I’m a figure-it-out-er and it doesn’t serve me all that well, truth be told. Usually it’s in my expressing my “Wait. What?” to another person that I get my reassurance that I’m not nuts and guidance as to how to proceed. Sometimes it’s a friend. Sometimes it’s my therapist. Sometimes it’s a recovery fellow. I’m just grateful that God speaks through the people around me, so that when truly life-changing things are on the table, I know God is right there in the midst of it.

What is the first action I take when faced with a major life event or decision?

*10-22*

“Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward.”

— 1 Samuel 16:13a

This is a close echo of yesterday’s text. Not six chapters after anointing Saul king in a private ceremony, Samuel is now anointing David king in front of his brothers. The same afternoon Saul is overcome with a prophetic frenzy, and now Samuel has the spirit of God coming mightily upon him (which sounds similar).

Already we are seeing the cracks in the monarchic system the Israelites have chosen for themselves. Saul had so much promise—he was tall and handsome and won some battles for Israel. But he was unstable—made rash decisions, and eventually went a little nuts. In other words, he was human and flawed. God decides Saul isn’t the right king for Israel after all and sends Samuel out to find the next king.

David has so much promise—he is also handsome, though not tall (he is still a boy), and will go on to kill the Philistine giant, Goliath, with a sling. He will become the most celebrated king in all of Israel’s history, and yet he will rape a woman and call for the assassination of her husband rather than admit he got her pregnant. He will be constantly at war, be nearly usurped by his son, and thanks to his countless wives and sexual slaves kick off a succession nightmare.

“Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” And while this quote wouldn’t be penned by Lord Acton until 1886, it was already true in Saul and David’s time. The only being this does not apply to is God.

Do I believe God is present in the decisions of governments? Why or why not?

*10-23*

“Nathan said to David, ‘You are the man! Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: I anointed you king over Israel, and I rescued you from the hand of Saul; I gave you your master’s house, and your master’s wives into your bosom, and gave you the house of Israel and of Judah; and if that had been too little, I would have added as much more. Why have you despised the word of the Lord, to do what is evil in his sight? You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword, and have taken his wife to be your wife, and have killed him with the sword of the Ammonites.”

— 2 Samuel 12:7-9

Main Idea: David was forced to confront the consequences of his sin.

The Sunday School version of this story of David and Bathsheba tells that the two were deeply in love. The grown-up version is far more insidious, which is perhaps why we don’t often hear it preached. But to leave out the stories of the despicable things God’s beloved people did does a disservice to the Bible, its story, God’s people, and God.

From a very young age, David was beloved. He grew up entitled. Samuel anointed David as a child, marked to be king of Israel. David won the hearts of Israel when he defeated Goliath. God blessed him with kingship, riches, land, women, and victories over his enemies. David had everything except that to which he was not entitled—another man’s wife. The part of the story we don’t read today tells us that he tried to trick Uriah into sleeping with his wife so that David’s indiscretion—soon to be made known due to Bathsheba’s pregnancy—would remain secret. When that didn’t work, David sent Uriah into battle to certain death. David didn’t just steal the man’s wife, he literally plotted an intricate plan to get away with murder.

God wasn’t having it. God sent Nathan, a trusted court prophet, to confront David about his actions. Through a parable, Nathan caught David in betrayal, adultery, and murder. What we don’t get in today’s story is David’s remorse (which only followed God’s threat to destroy David’s house by the sword). Maybe we leave today’s story with David’s sin because sometimes we all need to sit with the knowledge of the consequences of our sin for a bit.

Sometimes we push past the consequences so quickly because we want the thing to be behind us. We don’t want our biblical heroes to be marked by their sin. We don’t want our own lives shaped by our sin, either. But our lives are marked by sin—even when we consider ourselves good people. Because that’s what it is to be human. We sin. Our sin carries consequences. What happens next is up to us. We can continue as if the sin never happened, but when we do so, we fail to claim the fullness of what it means to be human—to be God’s beloved, flawed, thoughtful, remorseful, and forgiven human. Instead of running from our sin, maybe, like David, we can let ourselves be confronted by it. Look it straight in the eye. Own it. And then decide what to do with what we now see.

*10-24*

“Then his servants said to him, ‘What is this thing that you have done? You fasted and wept for the child while it was alive; but when the child died, you rose and ate food.’ He said, ‘While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept; for I said, “Who knows? The Lord may be gracious to me, and the child may live.” But now he is dead; why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he will not return to me.’”

— 2 Samuel 12:21-23

There is no right way to grieve. I remember a friend of mine, after she lost her toddler to illness, confiding in me that she wasn’t sure she was “doing it right.” She was questioning her feelings and sometimes lack of feelings, and wondering if something was wrong with her.

Of course something was wrong with her—she’d just lost a child! Grief is completely non-linear. After weeks, months, even years of feeling “okay” grief can cut you off at the knees and send you reeling for days all over again. And I have heard that absolutely no grief is more debilitating, more devastating and traumatic, than that which comes with the loss of a child.

David’s son was dying (supposedly a divine punishment for his sin, which I disagree with) and he was doing everything in his power to prevent it, which meant fasting and prayer and weeping. His servants thought he was going to harm himself in his grief. Yet the moment the child actually died, David seemed to snap back to normal. His logic seems cold, but I expect it is the coldness of denial, and that he will never really recover from the loss. Just look at the way he reacts when his treasonous son, Absalom is killed (2 Sam 18:33).

Over and over again we are reminded of David’s humanness, for better and for worse. This is one of those stories about David which so many of us can find relatable, and feel deep sympathy for this grieving father.

When and how has grief shown up in my life? Where have I found support?

*10-25*

“Then David consoled his wife Bathsheba, and went to her, and lay with her; and she bore a son, and he named him Solomon. The Lord loved him, and sent a message by the prophet Nathan; so he named him Jedidiah, because of the Lord.”

— 2 Samuel 12:24-25

The name “Jedidiah” means “Beloved of the Lord.” What an adorable nickname. The Bible is full of nick-names and renamings. Wordplay was a common in the Israelite tradition and the notes at the bottom of the pages of the Hebrew Bible especially explain those wordplays in the naming of people and places. Jesus was big on nicknames: Simon was called Peter. James and John were the “Sons of Thunder” which still cracks me up for some reason.

So here we have Solomon, Bathsheba’s second child with David. Her firstborn had died, and while a child can never be replaced, Bathsheba and David found joy in this new little boy. They were still smarting from the thought that God had allowed their first child to die as punishment for David’s reprehensible behavior, and were probably in need of reassurance—especially Bathsheba—that this child would not meet the same fate.

God reached out to them in love, sending the prophet Nathan to make it clear to the parents that God loved this little boy and it would all be okay.

I imagine their relief and how the phrase “Our little Jedidiah” came immediately to their lips. I can see that little boy toddling around learning that his name was Solomon but knowing that when mommy and daddy called him Jedediah they were saying “I love you.”

Did my parents have nicknames for me? Do I have nicknames for my kids? What do they mean to me?

*10-26*

“But you, my lord the king—the eyes of all Israel are on you to tell them who shall sit on the throne of my lord the king after him. Otherwise it will come to pass, when my lord the king sleeps with his ancestors, that my son Solomon and I will be counted offenders.”

— 1 Kings 1

I have absolutely zero interest in Game of Thrones (which surprises most of my friends, actually) but imagine it would have had a similar plot to the struggles and shenanigans Israel experienced from the moment they insisted God give them a king. The jockeying for power, the assumptions of privilege and succession, the back-stabbing—literally and figuratively, and the open warfare between all parties involved.

Here, David is on his deathbed and one of his sons (who is actually next in the line of succession, so has some justification) has already gone out and proclaimed himself king, following all the religious and societal customs to make that happen. Bathsheba, meanwhile, is completely freaked out—David had promised her that her son, Solomon, would be king and the prophet Nathan backed that up. If David died before making this official before witnesses, Solomon and Bathsheba would quickly become enemies of the state, would-be-usurpers whose claim to the throne would most likely have had them both immediately killed.

I knew a pastor who said that when kids told him the Bible was boring, he would counter that it was absolutely chock full of sex and violence. That would get their attention! (In fact I’d bet the Bible has more sex and violence than Game of Thrones, speaking from total ignorance, of course). I’m not saying that’s a good thing. I guess I’m just saying it’s a human thing. Throughout human history, we human beings have ascribed to our gods attitudes and behaviors that mirror our own need to amass power and make war to keep it. Thus, the Bible—co-authored by God, but written down by men specifically—is merely a reflection of the tumultuous reality of life as it was known at the time. With that particular context in mind, we are then left with the struggle to find the gospel among the disturbing happenings.

In this case, maybe it’s just the knowledge that God loved Solomon and that, in the end, God’s love for Solomon was borne out—Solomon became king as David had promised and, while he, too, was fatally flawed, he was a pretty darn good king for most of his reign.

What do I find interesting or helpful about stories like this in the Bible?

*10-27*

“Has this thing been brought about by my lord the king and you have not let your servants know who should sit on the throne of my lord the king after him?”

— 1 Kings 1:27

I love Nathan. He has such a talent for playing dumb. Earlier on, he comes to David with a parable about a man and his sheep and tricks David into condemning himself for his reprehensible behavior toward Bathsheba and her murdered husband. Now he comes in and says, “Gee, your kingship, your son, Adonijah, is out there claiming to be king and the priests and the army are all toasting him like it’s a done deal. Did I miss something? Did you go make a proclamation that I didn’t hear?”

He’s hardly going to waltz in and be like, “Dude. Are you a complete idiot? Have you no idea what your son is doing out there? I mean, for crying out loud! Are you king or are you king?!?” No, he makes sure not to ruffle David’s ego, acting as if he, Nathan, is the ignorant one, and giving David all the power to address the situation. He’s kind of brilliant that way. And, honestly, he’s good at the job God called him to—to be an advisor and helper to David. Suddenly I find myself wanting to know more about him. Think I have some reading ahead of me.

What figures from the Bible intrigue me? Who would I love to know more about?

*10-28*

“Solomon was informed, ‘Adonijah is afraid of King Solomon; see, he has laid hold of the horns of the altar, saying, “Let King Solomon swear to me first that he will not kill his servant with the sword.”’ So Solomon responded, ‘If he proves to be a worthy man, not one of his hairs shall fall to the ground; but if wickedness is found in him, he shall die.’ Then King Solomon sent to have him brought down from the altar. He came to do obeisance to King Solomon; and Solomon said to him, ‘Go home.’”

— 1 Kings 1:51-53

Oh, snap! This plays like a scene in a movie, I tell you. Solomon is no fool. Adonijah had set himself up as David’s successor and had it ripped out from under him when David had Solomon anointed king. Adonijah knows that without Solomon’s favor, he is a dead man. Solomon knows that Adonijah isn’t about to just roll over. He’ll pay lip service to his loyalty to the new king, but Solomon’s just too smart for that. “As long as you play nice, you live. But you step even a hair’s breadth out of line and you’re done.” Solomon knows that Adonijah’s true colors will come out sooner or later, and he refuses to be placed in a position where he makes a promise he has to later renege on, at the loss of his own reputation. Adonijah has no choice but to agree to the deal, so he comes out of where he’s been cowering in the temple and bows down to Solomon.

I imagine Solomon regarding the guy with utter coldness as Adonijah goes through the motions of being loyal, then saying with complete dismissiveness, “Go home.”

Shivers, I tell you. Right down my spine.

Once again, I find myself straying from the idea of writing a devotional about God’s scripture, pulled away by the theatrical nature of some of this stuff. Perhaps I can draw myself back into the ongoing thread of the downsides of Israel demanding a monarchy rather than letting God rule them in a more decentralized, anarchic manner, and say that here, at least, God’s people are getting a competent king who truly does love—and is loved by—God. Even if he sounds like Michael Corleone.

Can I find the positive in modern political leaders? What draws me to those I support?

*10-29*

“Solomon said, ‘Now therefore as the Lord lives, who has established me and placed me on the throne of my father David, and who has made me a house as he promised, today Adonijah shall be put to death.’”

— 1 Kings 2:24

I think I missed something here. Probably because I’m not well-versed in the intrigues that occur in the upper echelons of monarchy. (Did I mention I’ve never watched Game of Thrones?) I can’t quite figure out why Adonijah’s request for his dead father’s former slave girl as a wife was so cataclysmic. Bathsheba certainly didn’t see it coming and I got the sense she was no idiot. I mean, Solomon did warn Adonijah that if he tried anything funny Solomon would have him killed. Maybe his designs on Abishag was symbolic?

Whatever the cause that I’m too dense to understand, Solomon neatly eliminated his chief rival for the kingship. The story continues on to the end of 1 Kings 2, wherein Solomon also eliminates Adonijah’s co-conspirators in putting Adonijah prematurely on the throne before David could pull it out from under him. So I guess Solomon’s reign is now secure, so we can get on with all the good stuff we know about him. I guess it just reiterates all of Samuel’s warnings from way back in 1 Kings that the people’s demand for a king wouldn’t turn out the way they wanted it to. God really does know what’s best for us. If only we would listen.

Do I find the intrigues and political jockeying in these stories exciting? Interesting? Off-putting? Why?

*10-30*

“All Israel heard of the judgment that the king had rendered; and they stood in awe of the king, because they perceived that the wisdom of God was in him, to execute justice.”

— 1 Kings 3:28

Main Idea: Solomon was not worthy because he was wise. He was worthy because he was God’s.

This may be one of the earliest chicken-or-the-egg puzzles. Did God grant Solomon wisdom because Solomon asked for wisdom? Or did Solomon ask for wisdom because he was already wise enough to do so?

Certainly Solomon respected the office to which God had appointed him, and took the job seriously. One of the first disputes he was asked to mediate was between two women who both claimed a child to be their own. Famously, Solomon threatened to chop the boy in half and give one half to each woman. It’s unlikely, given Solomon’s final ruling, that he actually intended to kill the child—more likely that he wanted to gauge the reactions of both women to determine which one truly had the boy’s best interest at heart. Regardless, Solomon did discern the boy’s mother and we all breathe a sigh of relief at the outcome.

Still, there’s that seed of doubt that creeps in—might Solomon have killed the baby if the mothers’ reactions had been different? When we take a look at Solomon’s entire story, there certainly are aspects of his life that were less than honorable. He often took wives from many surrounding lands, even worshiping idols and dedicating temple to his wives’ gods. He also built the temple on the backs of slaves—hard, cruel labor at times. Solomon seems to be a king like all other kings—flawed, selfish, cruel even. Yet we still lift him up as one of the Bible’s heroes.

Do we need biblical heroes so desperately that we fail to look at the terrible things they have done? Does acknowledging their sin shine too bright a light on our own sin?

Maybe there’s another way to look at this—that we can respect and honor God’s people—despite their flaws—because they are God’s people. Israel was in awe of Solomon, not just because he was wise, but because “they perceived that the wisdom of God was in him.” Ultimately, then, it was not Solomon that the people loved, but God they saw in Solomon.

Maybe that’s what makes us worthy, too. Not because we behave sinlessly (because we can’t). Not because we are wise or courageous or heroic. We’re worthy because we have God in us. We’re worthy because we are God’s. That is enough.

*10-31*

“Now the word of the Lord came to Solomon, ‘Concerning this house that you are building, if you will walk in my statutes, obey my ordinances, and keep all my commandments by walking in them, then I will establish my promise with you, which I made to your father David. I will dwell among the children of Israel, and will not forsake my people Israel.’ So Solomon built the house, and finished it.”

— 1 Kings 6:11-13

It’s not about the house. Sure, as a symbol of God’s presence with God’s people, the temple is critical. But God doesn’t live in a building made with hands. What matters isn’t the brick-and-mortar structure. It’s about the relationship.

God’s relationship with God’s people is a covenant relationship. God is right here with us, fully present. God loves us, knows us, and cares for us. God provides with abundance all that is needed for everyone to flourish. God forgives us and invites us to strive for holiness. Our part of the covenant is to be God’s people. To listen to the gifts of God’s words, to follow in the ways of God’s justice and mercy, to share in the joy of all of God’s creation. None of this requires a house.

But for God’s people at this time in history, a proclamation of fidelity had to be made. This temple would serve not just as proof of God’s adherence to God’s part of the covenant, but as a sign of the people’s adherence to their part. It would become a sacred space in which to make public declaration of love and faithfulness to God every day. Solomon knew such a building would be the centerpiece of his kingdom, and would unite God’s people in a whole new way.

So Solomon built the house, and finished it.

Are there physical objects or places in my life that are central to my relationship with God?