

## **A RISK ON THE PART OF GOD**

### **Psalm 23**

#### **I Samuel 16:1-13**

*A homily given by Larry R. Hayward on March 26, 2017, the Fourth Sunday in Lent, at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, Virginia.*

### **Psalm 23**

*The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.*

*He makes me lie down in green pastures;*

*he leads me beside still waters;*

*he restores my soul.*

*He leads me in right paths*

*for his name's sake.*

*Even though I walk through the darkest valley,*

*I fear no evil;*

*for you are with me;*

*your rod and your staff—*

*they comfort me.*

*You prepare a table before me*

*in the presence of my enemies;*

*you anoint my head with oil;*

*my cup overflows.*

*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me*

*all the days of my life,*

*and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD*

*my whole life long.*

### **I Samuel 16:1-13**

*The LORD said to Samuel, 'How long will you grieve over Saul? I have rejected him from being king over Israel. Fill your horn with oil and set out; I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons.' Samuel said, 'How can I go? If Saul hears of it, he will kill me.' And the LORD said, 'Take a heifer with you, and say, "I have come to sacrifice to the LORD." Invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what you shall do; and you shall anoint for me the one whom I name to you.'*

*Samuel did what the LORD commanded, and came to Bethlehem. The elders of the city came to meet him trembling, and said, 'Do you come peaceably?' He said, 'Peaceably; I have come to sacrifice to the LORD; sanctify yourselves and come with me to the sacrifice.'*

*And he sanctified Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice. When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, 'Surely the LORD's anointed is now before the LORD.' But the LORD said to Samuel, 'Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.'*

*Then Jesse called Abinadab, and made him pass before Samuel. He said, 'Neither has the LORD chosen this one.'*

*Then Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said, 'Neither has the LORD chosen this one.'*

*Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel, and Samuel said to Jesse, 'The LORD has not chosen any of these.'*

*Samuel said to Jesse, 'Are all your sons here?'* And he said, *'There remains yet the youngest, but he is keeping the sheep.'* And Samuel said to Jesse, *'Send and bring him; for we will not sit down until he comes here.'*

*He sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome. The LORD said, 'Rise and anoint him; for he is the one.'* 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.

*Samuel then set out and went to Ramah.*

## I.

From time to time people ask me who my favorite character in the Bible is, and no matter how lengthy or protracted my answer, David the King is always on the list. What fascinates me most about David is what novelist Geraldine Brooks has recently labeled “the dazzling contradictions” in David’s life,<sup>1</sup> though the world “dazzling” may be a bit gracious and forgiving. Indeed, King David is a person with tremendous capacity for good and evil, compassion and cruelty, tenderness and violence. Throughout his contradictions, both beauty and faith are never far away.

Consider some of the good in David:

- As near youngest of several sons, he is, Cinderella-like, relegated to domestic duty as a shepherd boy in an obscure village named Bethlehem; yet God chooses him, even while he is still a child, to be the next King in Israel, and Samuel anoints him as such.<sup>2</sup>
- David rises to this choice with a heroic military victory over Goliath of Gath, a giant fellow villagers are afraid to fight, a giant David slays with a sling and five smooth stones.<sup>3</sup>
- David is brought into the court of King Saul, who is still on the throne, where he proves to be the only person in the Kingdom who can calm the nerves of the increasingly jealous and mad ruler by playing the sweetest of music on a small harp known as a lyre.<sup>4</sup> This talent eventually wins David the moniker as the “sweet psalmist of Israel.”<sup>5</sup>
- When Saul descends into complete madness and loses his life, David formally becomes King and leads the nation in brilliant military victories, consolidation of tribes, and establishment of Jerusalem as the political and religious capital of the land.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Geraldine Brooks, *The Secret Chord* (New York: Viking, 2015), 301.

<sup>2</sup> I Samuel 16:1-13.

<sup>3</sup> I Samuel 17:1-27.

<sup>4</sup> I Samuel 16:14-23.

<sup>5</sup> II Samuel 23:1. KJV.

<sup>6</sup> II Samuel 2-10.

Yet darkness and evil that come forth from David's life as well:

- At the very moment his troops are giving their lives on the battlefield, David remains behind and violates a woman named Bathsheba, the wife of one of his elite corps of fighters.<sup>7</sup>
- When she sends word to David that she is pregnant, he orders her husband Uriah back from the battle front, and attempts to trick him into sleeping with his wife so that the child to be born will be assumed to be his, but when Uriah refuses the privileges of marriage while his fellow soldiers remain in battle, David sends him back to the battle front with an order to the commanding officer that locates the troops in such a way that Uriah will be killed.<sup>8</sup>

Yet there still remains good in David:

- When Nathan the prophet confronts him about his crimes, he responds, "I have sinned."<sup>9</sup>
- When the child born to Bathsheba falls ill, David intercedes with God for the life of the child, and when as predicted the child dies, David faces the reality head on.<sup>10</sup>
- When violence enters David's household as his sons break into factions and form troops with arms to go against David and against one another, David makes certain that Mephibosheth, one of Saul's grandsons whom the text describes as "crippled in the feet" keeps his place every evening seated at the King's table.<sup>11</sup>

Brooks remarks that despite having left "little trace...outside the pages of the Bible...David *must have existed*, for no people would invent such a flawed figure for a national hero." It is the predominance and drama of these flaws that make David a figure of "dazzling contradictions." It is the combination of bane and blessing, good and ill, within him that leads me never to stop reading or pondering his lengthy and fallen life.

## II.

In the book of Psalms, seventy-three of the one-hundred fifty psalms are labeled "A Psalm of David." Some David may have written. Some may have been written in his name, in his honor, or in his memory. Among the warmest and most memorable "Psalm of David" is Psalm 23, which so many of us know by heart. "*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.*"

At what point in his deeply contradictory life might David have written this psalm? When might he have put pen to parchment?

- Was it when he was chosen by God over all his brothers and anointed by Samuel as King? *The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want.*
- Was it when he slew Goliath? *Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.*
- Was it when he restored the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem? *My cup runneth over.*

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<sup>7</sup> II Samuel 11:1-6.

<sup>8</sup> II Samuel 11:7-25.

<sup>9</sup> II Samuel 12:1-15.

<sup>10</sup> II Samuel 12:15b-23.

<sup>11</sup> II Samuel 4:4; 9:1-13; 15:1-4; 19:24-30.

- Was it when he lost the infant born to Bathsheba or when he received word that his son Absalom had indeed been killed in battle? *Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil; for Thou art with me.*
- Did David compose the psalm on his deathbed, Nathan and Bathsheba writing it down as he whispered it, completing its poetry and then giving up his spirit? *Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*

In a recent Sunday evening class, I asked participants to share which phrase of the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm means the most to them. Nearly everyone had a favorite phrase and nearly all the phrases were selected from among those in the class. This deeply flawed human being named David – this shepherd and king and husband and soldier the military leader and commander in chief and ruler and songwriter and lyre-player – penned words of comfort which never go out of style: *“The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want.”*

### III.

Given these glaring contradictions between the various David’s we come to know through scripture, what do we learn about ourselves? What do we learn from this flawed King whose son Christ is called<sup>12</sup> and from the psalm he wrote which warms our hearts whenever we hear it? What do we make of the God who lies behind both?

In our text for today, we are introduced to David at the point at which God chooses him as a mere child to become King and at which Samuel anoints him to the office he will occupy a bit later. I cannot but marvel at what a *risk* God takes to invest God’s own presence and work in the world to one who will prove to be such a flawed human being. It is truly a *risk* on the part of God for God to attach himself to this boy shepherd.

But over the years as I have reflected on the choice of David, I have come to realize that given given the “flawed figure” that each of us, like David, is, given the “dazzling contradictions” that comprise the lives of each of us in this sanctuary, in this choir loft, in this chancel, each person who dares stand behind this pulpit or this Table – for God to choose any of one of us individually or all of us collectively to be bearers of his image and likeness in the world represents an enormous risk on the part of God. Why would an all-powerful and all-knowing God invest God’s very self in a person like David – or for that matter a person like Jacob or Solomon or Esther or Paul or Timothy or Phoebe or Matthew or you or me? Why would God take such risk?

The answer, I believe, lies in words God uses in instructing Samuel to anoint David as King. God says:

*‘...the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.’*

Scholars tell us this last phrase can be translated: “The Lord looks *into* the heart” or “The Lord looks *with* the heart.”<sup>13</sup>

- The first implies that in choosing David, in choosing us, God sees something beautiful and wonderful and of great potential in our hearts that others, including we ourselves, may not see.
- The second implies that in choosing us, God looks into God’s own heart and sees the future God intends for all creation and trusts God’s own power to include us in its coming into being.

<sup>12</sup> Matthew 1:1.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Alter, *The David Story: A Translation with Commentary on 1 and 2 Samuel* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1999), 96.

*Together* these translations say that despite who we have been as individuals and as a human race, God chooses us because God entrusts us with the future and entrusts the future to us. God chooses us because he believes in the future, he is committed to the future, and he entrusts us to bear his image and likeness into the future. God places his faith in us. God risks investing in us because God knows who we can truly be, what unfathomable beings we can truly become, what unfathomable things we can do “in God’s image.” We are a risk on the part of God, but a risk God takes, a risk that leads our cup to “runneth over.”

#### IV.

Some of you know that my two children – now grown – did not come into my life until they were five and seven, when I married their mother. Among the things this means is that I have never directly experienced – for more than a few minutes at a time – life with an infant, toddler, pre-schooler. I have never changed a diaper. Never intend to. The interactions I have had with the youngest of children has primarily been through baptisms I have conducted, in which my inexperience is on regular display during the most sacramental of moments.

But at times, I have been in the presence of a pre-schooler whose innate charisma have given me a glimpse of what being the parent of a young child must be at its best.

Last weekend, I conducted a wedding in which prior to the rehearsal a boy came up to me and said: “My name is Nathan. I’m four. I’m ‘The Door Greeter and Bulletin-Hander-Outer.’” Nathan had dark hair, dark round eyes, and round hipster glasses that were yellow and green and orange.

His parents later told me that Nathan has difficulty sitting still. I noticed.

At the reception, when Nathan was introduced as part of the wedding party, he did a little Michael Jackson maneuver on the dance floor.

When the bride and groom danced their first dance, he perched himself at the edge of the dance floor in rapt attention, shirttail out, shoes off.

The night before, at the rehearsal dinner at Carmines, an Italian restaurant downtown that serves the food family style, when the waiters brought a large platter of tiramisu for dessert, Nathan reached for a serving spoon, perused the table for a dessert plate, spotted the saucer under my coffee, lifted the cup, pulled the saucer out and piled it high with his portion of the luscious, chocolate desert.

His parents rushed over to apologize. I assured them I was not accustomed to having a saucer beneath my coffee cup and that the coffee was still quite good. I surmised that apologizing for Nathan is something they do often; but more than that, I could tell that they seem to have mastered – at least for the moment – the art of “being Nathan’s parents.”

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The next day as I stood in the chancel and watched Nathan’s aunt walk down the aisle to join the man she was marrying, I was reminded that:

- In the privileged sectors of society in which most of us live, the decision to marry is usually a choice:
- And that, for the most part, the decision to seek to have a or adopt a child is also a choice.

When we choose to marry or bring a child into our lives, we are taking a risk, a risk of which most of us are aware at least beneath the surface; but we are also acting out of a fundamental sense of trust that the earth will

remain, that the cosmos will continue, the future holds promise. For most of us, as flawed as we know ourselves to be, a decision to marry or have a child involves a basic trust in life; and if we are religious, a basic trust in the God who creates life and places us within its benefits and beauty.

I believe God's choice of David lies within this same category.

- God did not have to act in creation.<sup>14</sup>
- God did not have to provide an Ark by which a remnant of the human race would survive his desire to start over.<sup>15</sup>
- God did not have to call Abraham and Sarah<sup>16</sup> after the fiasco of the Tower of Babel.<sup>17</sup>
- And God did not have to act to choose David to be King and instruct Samuel to anoint him to that high office.
- In addition, God could have stopped with this first King born in Bethlehem, but God did not so stop.<sup>18</sup>

All this shows that God is so committed to the future and that the future will be sufficiently bright that God is willing to attach himself to us – to David the King, to Nathan the Prophet and Nathan the child at the wedding – so that we will be bearers of God's image into this future God brings.

Being on the receiving end of that risk and choice – as we are – is a challenge. But it is a challenge to which we – in God's image – can rise.

The Lord is our Shepherd;  
We shall not want.  
He leads us in right paths  
For his names sake.  
He prepares a Table for us  
In the presence of our enemies.  
He anoints our heads with oil.  
Our cup runneth over.

Amen.

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<sup>14</sup> Genesis 1-2.

<sup>15</sup> Genesis 6-9.

<sup>16</sup> Genesis 12:1-4.

<sup>17</sup> Genesis 11.

<sup>18</sup> Luke 2:1-7.