

Homily – July 14, 2024

If you were listening to the lessons this morning (and if you weren't, you can take a look at them now in the bulletin), you may have wondered, "What the heck do these passages have to do with each other?" David dancing with the ark of God? Paul explaining predestination? Mark retelling the beheading of John the Baptist? When Jennifer asked me if I'd like to preach this morning, I looked up these readings and asked myself the same question. I'm not sure I have an answer, but I'll leave that to you to judge.

Let me start with a different question: Did you go to Sunday School when you were a kid?

Your answer probably depends on when you grew up and whether your family went to church. I grew up in the 1940's and 50's when churchgoing in America was nearly ubiquitous. If you met someone who was new in town, you asked them what neighborhood they lived in and whether they had found a church home. My family worshipped at our Presbyterian church every week. I think I got a gold star for Sunday School attendance, and I went to Vacation Bible School in the summer, too. Our church even had adult church school, with a choice of 8-week courses on various Biblical and theological topics.

If you did go to Sunday School, you were surely taught the story of David and Goliath. It is, at best, a highly fictionalized account. And it is one of two different accounts of how David became part of King Saul's court. There are, in fact, two differing versions of the Goliath story. At any event, it provides a heroic backstory for David's ascent to the throne. In today's reading from 2 Samuel, David gathers thirty thousand chosen men of Israel and brings the ark of God to the city of David where they dance with songs and lyres and tambourines and castanets. It's a scene that would warm the heart

of any church music director. Then everybody got bread, meat, and a cake of raisins. Sounds like a good coffee hour.

David is the central figure in the history of ancient Israel. He united the kingdoms of Israel and Judah and established Jerusalem as the capital. He is also central to Christian theology because the Messiah is the one who will restore David's kingdom. Matthew goes to great lengths to trace Jesus' lineage to the House of David. But despite the efforts of the writers of the two books of Samuel to absolve David of any role in the downfall of King Saul, David turns out to be a highly flawed leader. If you know any story about David other than the Goliath tale, it is likely to be one you didn't learn in Sunday School. While David stays home, having literally sent his warriors to fight his battles, he sees Bathsheba bathing and decides he wants to sleep with her. Then, fearing that she would become pregnant, he recalls her husband from the front and urges him to go home and make love to his wife. Uriah, in stark contrast to David, puts duty before pleasure and says he must return to battle. David has him sent to the front lines where he is killed. David's abuse of power with a vulnerable woman sadly doesn't surprise us much, considering our own more recent experience with our own leaders.

There's also a king in Psalm 84, which we read this morning. It's labeled in the Bible as a "Psalm of David," which probably means belonging to David rather than written by him. It asks, "Who is this King of glory? The Lord, strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle."

We see another flawed king in Mark's gospel. Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great, who in Matthew's gospel sent the Wise Men in search of the "one who is born King of the Jews." This Herod, like his father, is a puppet ruler for the Roman Empire who has heard about Jesus and feels threatened by him. He thinks Jesus may be John the Baptist returned from the dead, so Mark recounts the story of the beheading.

The ancient world saw all its rulers as divinely ordained, if not divinely procreated, a concept that carried into the monarchies of Western Europe until the age of revolution. Only last year, we watched as the Archbishop of Canterbury, the head of the Anglican Communion of which we are a part, place the crown on the head of Charles III.

Last week, we celebrated the anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, a document which catalogued in exhausting detail the many ways in which George III was a flawed king and asserted the right to be free of his tyrannical rule. Political power would be vested in a free people (at least in white male property owners). So here we are. No more kings, but not much happier with our choice of leaders. Sadly, our highly partisan camps seem to want what people have always wanted from their kings: somebody who can defeat their enemies.

Many of Jesus' followers wanted him to be a Messiah who would restore David's kingship. They paraded him into Jerusalem like a king, laying palms before him. (Unlike St. Thomas's on Palm Sunday, they didn't have a bagpiper!) Western Christian art is replete with the royal imagery. At the end of each liturgical year, we celebrate the Feast of Christ the King. Western Christian art is replete with the royal imagery, and our hymnbook is filled with the language of battle and triumph.

Yet Jesus was clear that his kingdom is not of this world. And he modeled a very different kind of leadership, a leadership of servanthood and humility. The Type A, command and control leader so highly valued in our secular culture, in the world of winners and losers, has no role to play in the world of the Beatitudes or at the foot of the Cross. No, when we are called to a position of leadership, no matter how large or small, Jesus asks us to follow him in the way of the servant.

I had a friend when I was in college who was a passionate supporter of Pope John XXIII's efforts to reform the Catholic Church. He loved to point out that of all the papal

titles the Pope could use, the one that Pope John preferred was *Servus servorum Dei*, the servant of the servants of God.

Next month we at St. Thomas's will welcome a new leader as our Priest-in-Charge, the Rev. Alan Murchie. We may be tempted to hope that he will be a charismatic leader whose brilliant preaching and warm personality will fill the pews and the offering plates and bring back "the church as we once knew it." Of course, there are probably as many ideas of what that means as there are parishioners. And I can't imagine that our half-time Priest-in-Charge could be given a worse mandate.

Alan Murchie is, in fact, coming to a St. Thomas's that has not existed before. A church that in the past year has raised up new lay leaders to maintain and enhance our worship. Our Vestry, under the superb leadership of Jennifer Herdt, has been a model of servant leadership for the parish. They have led Morning Prayer and preached while fulfilling many of the administrative tasks previously handled by the Rector. Others have stepped up as well to shepherd St. Thomas's into new ways of "being church." My hope for Alan – which I'm confident he would embrace – is that as the servant of the servants of God in this place, he will lead us to keep finding new ways to live out the words of the prophet Micah on our website:

**DOING JUSTICE + LOVING KINDNESS + WALKING HUMBLLY WITH GOD**

Amen.