

Preaching During Ordinary Time, Year B

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Marilynne Robinson was recently asked whether she had ever had a religious awakening. “No,” she responded. “A mystical experience would be wasted on me. Ordinary things have always seemed numinous to me.”¹

Though the “ordinary” in “ordinary time” comes from the word “ordinal” which means “numbered,” ordinary time might also provide numinous moments as the preacher leads the congregation through the extraordinary stories of ordinary people who succeed and fail, fail and succeed in their quest to be faithful to the covenantal God of Israel.

No one failed as deeply or succeeded as highly as David, whose life is opened up to readers like no others in all of scripture, save for perhaps Moses. Whereas the narratives concerning Moses move in a different, more or less singular direction, the stories involving David take us in every direction possible. We see him pursued and pursuing, in God’s favor and out, in the hearts of his people and out, triumphant and downcast. And no individual in Israel’s history has as many roles—as giant-slayer, shepherd, musician, manipulator of men and women, loyal friend and subject, lover, warrior, dancer and merry-maker, father, brother, son, religious enthusiast, and king!

What are we to make of this complex portrayal, and where do we begin? The Sundays in Ordinary Time of Year B give the preacher the opportunity to dig deep into the fertile soil of David’s life, generating new possibilities for our lives and the lives of our parishioners. Preaching a series on David also addresses some of the leading concerns about preaching from the lectionary. It re-establishes the ancient liturgical practice of “*lectio continuo*,” or continuous reading, enabling the preacher to tell the story of faith in a much deeper and broader way than is often the custom, especially during the Advent/Christmas and Lent/Easter seasons.

In addition, it gives us an opportunity to understand how Jesus Christ and the early church were shaped by the God they already knew in Hebrew scriptures. To neglect the Old Testament, as lectionary preachers often do, is to neglect a vast sweep of the history of the people of God, people who succeed and fail in their relationship with God and with one another. We have many people in our pews (and admittedly in our pulpits!) who ascribe to a modern day Marcionism, believing in a God of wrath and judgment in the Hebrew Scriptures and a God of love and mercy in the New Testament. A series on David would go a long way toward dispelling that heresy and opening up a conversation about the ways we struggle today to be at one with God’s hopes for the world. Thus we turn to David in his rise to power, his managing power, and his death and violence.

Rise to Power

The story begins with a sad, poignant transition. In six chapters, Saul has moved from being described as “not a man among the people of Israel more handsome than Saul; from his shoulders upward he was taller than any of the people” (I Samuel 9:2), to the moment when Samuel who had talked Saul into being king, had to tell him he

was through: "The Lord has torn the kingdom of Israel from you this day, and has given it to a neighbor of yours, who is better than you" (I Samuel 15:27-28).

Samuel sets out his task of finding a new king, and he thinks he has found him in Eliab, the eldest and tallest of the sons of Jesse of Bethlehem. Samuel looked at Eliab and thought to himself, "Surely the Lord's anointed is before me, ah, that is, before the Lord." But deep down (and somehow we just knew this was going to happen), the Lord said to Samuel, "Beauty is only skin deep, Samuel. Don't fall for appearances as you did with Saul. Eliab might look like a king, but I am looking at the inward person. And I do not see a king there, not in his heart."

Samuel had each of Jesse's sons parade before him, flex their muscles, swing their swords, whatever they had kings-to-be do. Each time Yahweh said, "Nope," and each time they got smaller and younger, less kingly in appearance.

Samuel was almost afraid to ask because he was afraid of the answer he would get. "Any others?" "Well, there is one, but he is out watching the sheep. And he's the youngest." In comes the runt of the family, a mere shepherd boy, which, at that time was no recommendation. Shepherds were on the low rung socially and culturally, so much so that their word was inadmissible in court.

We have heard the expression "How odd of God/ to choose the Jews." But just take a look at the Jews God chooses to choose! God seems to have a definite bias for the young, the small, the least, the apparently insignificant. When Saul was named king, he came from the smallest tribe. There was Abel over Cain, Jacob over Esau, Rachel over Leah, Joseph over all the older brothers, the prodigal son over the elder brother. It must be God's way of reminding us that God is in control of human destiny, that what happens is at God's beck and call and not ours, that history is, after all, God's story and not ours. This story, like so many others, stands as a beacon in a dark world that is lost in the shadows of boastful self-importance. We think we have some foreknowledge of how the story will turn out.

Even Samuel wonders about the whole vetting process. But he looks David over, and though being warned not to judge by outward appearances, finds that David is rather handsome once the dirt and grime are wiped off. After all, he does have nice eyes! Yahweh gives the word, and David is anointed king-to-be.

There is one troubling question left on the table as we turn to the rest of David's story. Did God *really* know what was in David's heart? Did God know of the lust that led to adultery and an arranged murder? Did God see the vengeful bloodthirstiness that led David to slaughter not only soldiers but women and children? Or was God simply taken in by the beauty of David's music and poetry, by the innocence of a teen-aged boy looking after sheep?

We would like to suggest that God did indeed see everything in David's heart, just as God sees the good and evil, the light and darkness of our hearts. God sees the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. And God still chooses us, pulls for us, hoping against all evidence that we will do the right thing. Further, God still loves us when the selfish outweighs the selfless and when the shadows block the light with a love that will not let us go.

God's inverting, subverting ways are evident in our next text with David and Goliath. Most sermons see David as analogous to anyone who ever had to face insurmountable odds, the archetypal Jungian symbol for everyone who had to find her holy grail. David is the little guy, against Goliath, representing every power that has ever imposed itself on us. But that is not what this story is about.

For forty days the battle line had been drawn. The soldiers of Saul, the Israelites, were dug in on the east. The Philistine warriors were dug in on the west. Between them was the deserted valley floor of Elah. Imagine the scene: The morning birds begin to stir. The guard is changed. Soldiers stretch and stoop over their fires. Suddenly, from the Philistine front comes sound of activity. Boulders begin to slide down from the hillside and tumble along the valley floor. Brush crackles. Armor clangs. From the shroud of shadows—through the morning mist, a figure appears. A blood-curdling laugh echoes through the valley. Then they see him—Goliath of Gath—a giant of a man, unlike any man seen before. His 220 pounds of armor catch the first darting rays of the sun.

News spreads like a brush fire, leaping through the ranks and dancing across the countryside to the shepherd tending his flock, the farmer in the field, the craftsperson at a bench. We see King Saul frantically contacting his defense ministry, wiring his scientists: “Get busy. Come up with an anti-Goliath weapon.” It doesn’t take a whole lot of imagination to see those fear-stricken Israelites doing all sorts of strange things, perhaps even changing the popular “Philistine fries” to “liberty fries.” It’s an old story, but a modern story.

After 9/11, we were told there was no other way. We were told through graphs and satellite shots and charts that Goliath is our protector, and the only way to defeat “their” Goliath was to produce a more powerful Goliath of our own, with a more powerful roar. By and large, as a nation we accepted it. By and large, much of the nation has come to see its underlying fallacy. As President Obama stated in his inaugural speech only a few months ago, “Our power alone cannot protect us.” The Philistines were ready for, and hoping for, an anti-Goliath, a carbon-copy of force to come charging out. Goliath wasn’t prepared for a boy. He didn’t know how to handle the unexpected.

It is God’s inverting, subverting ways of the world. In another time there was another giant, whose name was Imperial Rome. There were those who were ready to overthrow the giant, forming guerilla bands in the hills. But when God acted, when God spoke, it was in a whimper—through a baby boy. And when he grew up and talked of putting up the sword, the baby whimper couldn’t compete with Rome’s roar, so they rejected him. Nailed him to a cross. But God subverted that as well.

The question before us is “Has God’s strategy changed?” Do we have a sneaking suspicion, through all these biblical clues, that God might want us to use our imagination and do the opposite of what is expected? Has God’s method changed since God took the form of a backwoods carpenter and said, “A new commandment I give you—that you are to love one another as I have loved you.”

Who can say whom God will or will not anoint to walk out on the plains of Elah in 2009? Who can say what form the New David will take? If history is a witness, we can be sure that it will not be another Goliath.

The lectionary then turns to the transition from Saul to David as king. A messenger clearly believes he is bringing good news to David about Saul’s death. Hadn’t Saul’s madness and envy kept David on the run for years? Now David is free to be the one who he was meant to be. He should be preparing for his inaugural parade. But he is unable to do so. He aches with loss and does not turn his face away from any of it. He gathers up his pain and grief and fashions them into a lament of such shattering beauty that the walls of God’s house still reverberate with its passion centuries later.

Thus David’s first act as king, his first mandate is that they learn to express their grief so they may know how to speak of their hurt. He commands that all the people

learn how to sing the song of lament. He bears witness to the truth expressed in the somber Vietnam War Memorial on the mall in Washington D.C.: “There is no healing without acknowledging the wound, no healing without telling the pain we feel.”

Recent presidents have had their finest hours when they have led the nation as mourners-in-chief. Ronald Reagan following the Challenger explosion, Bill Clinton following the Oklahoma City bombing, and George W. Bush in the days following 9/11 all seemed to understand that only by the open declaration of all we have lost and all that we grieve after will we be able to seek a new beginning.

We pastors are often tempted to offer the false comfort which only quiets our parishioners’ hurt. Far from being the David of sweet songs of Israel, here David is standing atop the mountain shrieking his pain and loss to God. Others simply would not understand. “Don’t tell it to the people of Gath or the Philistines,” he instructs. They will only mock us saying, “Where is your God?” and suppose that such lamenting is a sign of our broken faith.

Our answer to the question is, “Right here in worship, here among the suffering of the earth, which itself is groaning in travail, here and wherever people cry out in vain.”

Managing Power

The next three Sundays in ordinary time center on the story of David’s early monarchy, a time before his ownership of the throne is challenged, either through his own unfaithfulness (2 Samuel 11:1-12:13a) or through his sons’ posturing (2 Samuel 13 ff). The stories in this abbreviated cycle, though, are not bereft of the question of the authority of the throne; they simply cast it on a more fundamental level. Taken together, the three lections remind the hearer that the Lord is the power that stands behind David—and takes pains to show that the Lord is not a puppet for David’s manipulation.

The first passage establishes the parameters of the kingship. David makes a covenant with the people before the Lord, continuing his nearly magical ascension to power, “becoming greater and greater, for the Lord, the God of hosts was with him (2 Samuel 5:10).” David is received as king, but the text insists that the kingship is enveloped by the providence of God.

The second and most interesting text in the cycle concerns the ark’s movement from its place in Abinadab’s home, a place the ark had resided ever since the Philistines had abandoned it on the highway to Beth-shemesh out of fear of its disruptive power, to a more exalted place in David’s kingdom. Unfortunately, the lectionary excises the most interesting detail in the passage (in the interest of comfortable theology, one supposes): the death of Uzzah, a death which occurs as he reaches out to steady the ark over a rough stretch of road. David reacts to the death in fear, perhaps recognizing that he can not manage the power of God as easily as he managed his ascension to the throne, and—like a Philistine—abandons the ark in the house of Obed-edom for three months.

The final passage in this arc (2 Samuel 7:1-14a) is a much ballyhooed one, marking the moment when the Lord establishes an unconditional covenant with David’s house and promises a familial relationship with David’s sons. In the context of our reading, however, the first half of the passage addresses the truth that God’s power resides behind David’s and subsequently can not be managed by David for political purposes:

Are you the one to build me a house to live in? I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle. Wherever I have moved about among all the people of Israel, did I ever speak a word with any of the tribal leaders of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, "Why have you not built me a house of cedar?" Now you shall say to my servant David: Thus says the Lord of hosts: I took you from the pasture.... (2 Samuel 7:5b-8a)

As always, the initiative belongs to the Lord. It is God who will determine where God moves and how God acts in the world. David will become the beneficiary of God's activity in the world, but just like Uzzah and the Philistines, he will not be able to direct God's activity in the world. This series of three readings over the summer provides an opportunity to raise questions with our congregations about how we try to manage the power of God (perhaps from a fear of God's disruptive grace) rather than rightly seeing how our own power emanates from it when we align ourselves with God's intentions.

The Power of Violent Texts

The final set of readings in the David cycle focuses on the legacy of violence that arises from David's departure from God's intentions in the incident with Bathsheba. Each of the final four Sundays of the cycle end in death, and in the case of the judgment, Nathan delivers to David the final scripture on which we will focus, the death of a child (2 Samuel 11:26-12:13a).

Such a scripture leaves us with a common quandary. We believe scripture is a living word from God. We also believe God is loving. Then we read, "The LORD struck the child that Uriah's wife bore to David, and it became very ill" (2 Samuel 12:15), and we wonder how to reconcile these things: a loving God and a living scripture.

What are we to make of stories where little children die for the sins of the parent? Or to enlarge the question to the whole of scripture, where first-born children die because Pharaoh is hard-hearted?

We have standard answers to pacify us for another week: God is loving, but scripture reflects the violent, historical conditions of its writers. Or scripture reflects the rhetorical needs of the story-tellers. For instance, if Pharaoh—the primary symbol in the Old Testament for evil government—is going to initiate his story by drowning the boy children in Egypt, you should expect Moses—the boy who survived—to end it, and the death of Pharaoh's son and the drowning of his army will be required to do so. Similarly, if David is going to kill Uriah to cover up Bathsheba's pregnancy, then the child will die when it becomes public knowledge that David is the father. With the allusion to Egypt in the background, the story is rhetorically clear: If you're a servant of God who thinks he can get away with acting like Pharaoh, then you've got another plague coming.

That answer doesn't sit well in our congregations, so we give other answers: God has changed, or our understanding of God has changed. We don't believe that God would pursue violence against a child. Would Jesus do that? No? Since we claim him as the definitive answer to our questions about God, we may find some peace here, but only if we'll be quiet and not ask the next question: What about the violence of the cross? What about the Son of Man coming in glory to judge the earth, the violence that

underwrites the hope of the New Testament? Or what about the rest of the text? If we can't rely on the revelation of God here, can we rely on it when John writes, "For God so loved the world"? How can we know that John's claim is not also conditioned by history and agenda?

So much violence in a covenant of grace is a problem for us—both as preachers and as hearers. None of the answers *really* mollify us. The church's *de facto* answer has been to dismiss the text altogether as a relic of a day gone by when political aggression could be couched in the language of faith (irony intended). The lectionary follows the same impulse, excising the most troubling verses from this cycle (12:13b-15), relieving us all of the duty of dealing with the violence.

The problem is, we do ourselves violence when we take that option. We remove the unfiltered word of God from our lives, packing it away with the good china and the silver place settings, and it becomes something that we don't use very often, which injures us, because we no longer hear the word of God, however conditioned it may be. We settle for the watered-down version we call preaching.

The dismissal does injury to us because whatever trouble we have reading scripture; it has no trouble reading us at all. When we remember that, it's easy to see how this frightening text can be a text to us as well. All we have to do is look around and see what any good therapist knows—the sins of the parent are visited on the child. David's sins of violence mean not only that the sword will never depart from his house (2 Samuel 12:10), but that it will rise against him from his own house, his son Absalom bringing the sword to him and dying as a result (2 Samuel 15 ff), fulfilling Nathan's judgment. His sins of violence mean that at least two of his sons will die at the hand of another son.

We don't need God to punish the child; we're quite capable of doing it ourselves. The sins aren't just sins of violence either. When we tell ourselves that we aren't beautiful enough or smart enough or creative enough, we teach our children that God doesn't love us just as we are. When we drink too much or take drugs or hit our family, we teach our children habits of dependency and conditional love. When we buy and buy and buy, we teach them the sin of consumption, the notion that things make us happy.

We can't escape sin. It's all around us. It's why we speak of total depravity in our tradition. But what can we do with such pervasive sin? The church has always turned to scripture. It's one reason we can't forsake it as easily as we are wont. Just like David confronted with Nathan, we have to listen to a word from God and stick with it through the places that make us recoil. I suspect David listens to it because he knows God is in it. Similarly, these scriptures are so important to us, not simply because they were written by our spiritual ancestors, not simply because they give witness to God's redemptive relationship with them, but because when we read scripture, God meets us in it. It's in the reading and re-reading of the text, it's in the arguing about it, it's in our engagement with it that we meet God most clearly. The text is a location as much as it is anything else. God meets us in the reading—and sometimes, when we're there, God whispers to us, "Nathan didn't get that quite right. He was lost in his own sins of violence. He confused them with mine. I didn't kill the child. I would never kill a child." It's in our exploration of scripture that we discover the God who makes sense out of scripture. I know that's a circular argument, but what a circle once we're inside.

David's child dies. God touches him—it's actually the word for *plague*—right out of Exodus, just in case we hadn't connected David to Pharaoh yet. Then there's another

child by Bathsheba, Solomon, who inherits the sins of his father in the more traditional way. The biblical writer doesn't drag his feet in alerting us either. Directly after noting "The kingdom was established in the hand of Solomon," he writes, "Solomon made a marriage alliance with Pharaoh, king of Egypt; he took Pharaoh's daughter" (1 Kings 3:1). Of course, the lectionary during our final Sunday will start right *after* that verse.

But there's another interesting legacy in this story as well. Scripture informs us that David and Bathsheba had three more sons: Shimea, Shobab and *Nathan*. It's a curious act to name your child after your accuser. Every time David called to him or lifted him in his arms or told him a story, he must have been reminded of Nathan leveling a judgment against him. It's curious, but it also suggests that he must have discovered something in that hard Word of God delivered to him by Nathan—something he never wanted to forget, some element of grace that lingered afterward.

In the entirety of the Old Testament, we never hear of the son Nathan again—only in these three parallel verses that list David's sons (2 Samuel 5:14, 1 Chronicles 3:5, 14:4). He disappears, never to speak to his legacy of repentance or grace. He pops up in a surprising place, though. Luke mentions him in the genealogy that traces Jesus back to David (Luke 3:31). Perhaps just as Solomon inherited his father's sins, whatever revelation David had about God's grace that caused him to name his son Nathan seems to be a revelation that passed down too—all the way to Christ.

This is why we read the hard texts, the ones that make us recoil, because when we meet grace in them, it reverberates in us for generations.

Note

1 Marilynne Robinson, *The Christian Century*, January 13, 2009, 8.