

Saul: Love's Kindling

August 8, 2010
1 Samuel 28: 3 -25

Reverend Heather Miner

Today's conversation is part 2 of a 3 part series I've titled, "Those who Loved David." Last week we looked at Michal, this week is Saul, and on the 22nd we will read about Jonathan, David's best friend. In this series, I seek to follow the way of one of my heroes, Brevard Childs, a professor who is famous for creating a method of scriptural interpretation called the canonical approach. In this method, we don't allow historical critical questions to override our sense that the Holy Spirit has reason for the scripture to be exactly as it is. We are challenged to look deeply into the text, even into the parts we don't like, to find God.

Ellen Davis, Child's student who is now an Old Testament professor at Duke, said at his memorial in 2003 that "[Childs] was the kind of teacher and colleague he was because he was a person of genuine humility. I remember him saying that in order to teach OT, 'you just need to get out of the way,' because the text itself is so compelling and interesting. Many academics don't know how to get out of the way - of the text, of their own students - and let something interesting happen around them. Childs did. That is what made him so approachable, and so enjoyable to think with."

Childs believed the Holy Spirit was at work in the formation of the Bible, and Childs believed the Holy Spirit was at work in the formation of each person who dared to read scripture prayerfully. Therefore, in this series, I seek not to tell you how to be a better disciple or a better person. Rather, I seek to get out of the way, so that something interesting may happen around you. Honor your own questions, your own connections, for in your seeking, God will take hold of you.

Last week, we looked at the narratives surrounding Michal, David's first wife, and how the love she longed for was never complete in David and, yet, there was an extraordinary moment when Palti, her second husband, came after her, shed tears for her, on the day she was taken back to David's palace. While everything is not made right, Palti's following after her gave us a glimpse of God. Today we turn to the narrative around Saul, a reluctant spear carrying king. Unlike Michal, the scriptures that speak of Saul are too many to quote. When David turns away from Michal at the palace, she disappears from the narrative. But when God turns away from Saul, the scripture continues to follow him with

great interest. That's part of the genius of this story. It instills compassion in us for the one who has lost God's favor.

Saul, from the very beginning, seemed like an odd one to make king. Where David's entrance onto the political landscape is of him killing the giant Philistine, Goliath, Saul's entrance is described in Chapter 9: 3ff in this way: "And some asses belonging to Kish, Saul's father, were lost, and Kish said to Saul his son, 'Take, pray, with you one of the lads, and rise, go seek the asses.'

It is hardly a challenge befitting a king. While David is a good shepherd, Saul can't find his charges. The scripture goes on to describe his search:

And he passed through the high country of Ephraim and he passed through the region of Shalishah, but they did not find them. And they passed through the region of Shaalim, and there was nothing there, and they passed through the region of Benjamin, but they did not find them. They were just coming into the region of Zuph when Saul said to his lad who was with him, "Come, let us turn back, lest my father cease worrying about the asses and worry about us."

Watching Saul search does nothing to raise our level of confidence in this one who will become Israel's ruler. He simply wanders from place to place, not consulting either ground or people or the heavens for help. Furthermore, Saul is ready to quit before the task is complete. And he would have, if not for the resourceful thinker, the unnamed lad he brought with him, who says,

Look, pray, there is a man of God in this town, and the man is esteemed—whatever he says will surely come to pass. Now then, let us go there. Perhaps he will tell us of our way on which we have gone.

The one to whom the lad refers is the prophet Samuel. Now Samuel had a proper "call" story recorded in scripture. You remember, he is with Eli, and in the middle of the night he hears "Samuel, Samuel." He wakes up and runs to Eli, "what do you want master?" Eli says, "I didn't call go back to sleep." Three times this is repeated until Eli finally understands and says to Samuel, "next time you hear the voice, say 'Speak, Lord, your servant is listening.'" Samuel does just that and the Lord calls him into service.

Now, that is a proper way to be called by the Lord. It is a quotable scene that fits well into a Sunday School lesson or a 30 second elevator speech.

Not so for our wandering Saul. This "call" narrative goes on and on and on. That's probably why you've never heard of it, until today.

Saul and his lad ask some women where they can find this prophet and are told to head up the hill. And, as they do, they see a man coming down the hill. It is Samuel himself who has heard from the Lord, "This man is the one." Saul and his lad stop in front of Samuel, Saul looks into his face, and asks, "Tell me, pray, where is the house of the seer?"

And you think Samuel would have gone and asked God again at that moment if this was truly the one, for obviously the Lord had not taken the time to speak to Saul. Instead, Samuel says, "I am the seer," and tells Saul and his lad to go up the hill and they will eat together and don't worry, those asses have been found.

So begins Saul's utter dependence upon the prophet Samuel for sight. Throughout the scripture, it is Samuel who will tell Saul what is God's will. So it isn't surprising that he dares to call up Samuel's spirit when he cannot hear God on that fateful night before the battle in which he will die.

But note how different the tradition is around David. While David too has a prophet named Nathan, David speaks directly to the Lord: "Who am I, LORD God, and what is my house, that you have brought me this far?" (2 Samuel 7:18). In the books of Samuel, David begins the tradition of the Psalms where there is direct contact between God and the people. The Psalms is where Israel dares to call out to God in direct address..."You." Psalm 63: "O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you."

But God is not so present to the soon to be king, Saul, nor will he ever be. Perhaps this is what makes Saul so compelling. Saul's life shouts, "where are you?" "What am I to do?" "Why don't you make things more clear?"

Everything around Saul seems to be done in the most circuitous and confusing way, like this "call" story which I need to finish.

When morning comes, Samuel anoints Saul as king, privately, sending away the one witness, the lad that was with Saul, so even he does not see. There is no crowning, no extravagant ceremony which causes great trouble when Samuel tries to convince others that Saul is king. Once Samuel is done with his anointing, something that must have taken him all of a minute, he sends Saul away,

on a lengthy quest. At the end of the quest, the scripture says, "the spirit of the LORD seized Saul and he went into ecstasy" (1 Samuel 10:10). And the people didn't shout, Hooray for the King, and Saul didn't get a clear word from the Spirit of the Lord. Instead, the people wondered aloud "What has befallen the son of Kish? Is Saul, too, among the prophets" (1 Samuel 10:11)?

Saul's uncle gives Saul a chance to explain (10: 15-16):

"Where did you go?" he asks.

Saul replies, "to seek the asses. And we saw that they were nowhere and we came to Samuel."

"And what did Samuel say to you?"

Saul says, "He indeed told us that the asses had been found."

This kingly "call" story comes to an end in this illuminating conversation.

There's much more in our scriptures that points to Saul's reluctance to be king. But know, it is said of Saul that, once he did take the reigns, he was a fine warrior, a fine leader, killing thousands. He earns the respect of Israel, so much so that when he dies, he leaves behind many who have willingly fought for him and will continue to do so.

One day, King Saul entered into battle with the Amalekites. He had the Spirit of God behind him and Saul's army completely destroyed theirs. Saul had been told by God, through Samuel, to destroy everything of the Amalekites, including the livestock. Well, Saul, doesn't quite believe that is what God really meant. Being thrifty, he keeps the best livestock. And, because of this and a few other things that have happened previously, God becomes very angry, so angry that God tells Samuel that no longer will Saul be his man, he will seek one after his own heart. Saul will no longer have the Spirit of God behind him.

If this picture of God bothers you, you are not crazy or alone. Peter Hawkins, the professor I studied these texts with this Summer, a faithful Episcopalian, said, "The one person I don't have sympathy for when reading these narratives is God." He added with a smile, "which puts me in a very difficult position." So if you are shaking your head, you are in the best of company. But it's not time to set the scripture aside, it is time to delve in deeper.

Samuel finds Saul and gives him the news: "you have cast aside the word of the LORD and He has cast you aside from being king over Israel." (1 Samuel 15:26)

It took two chapters to work out Saul's call. It will take 15 chapters to describe his fall. It is after this scene that David enters into Saul's service. David has defeated Goliath. He becomes part of Saul's army. And he enters

into Saul's court with a harp, playing out the evil spirit that enters into Saul from time to time now that God has departed. And Saul loves David. But it won't take long for that love to change. Saul will see in David what he once had. He will understand that David is the one who will take over his kingdom and he will do what all kings do, try to kill the one who would take his throne.

Love's kindling...the one Saul once loved, David who brought him comfort, is the one who is going to replace him as king. The God who he once trusted is the God who takes all he counted on away from him.

And Saul chases David throughout the lands. If he could just strike David down, then...

Yet, the text resists making Saul into a simple evil enemy. Even David cannot help but stop himself from killing Saul when he has a chance. The story tells of a time when Saul goes into a cave to "relieve" himself, the very same cave David and his army are hiding within. Instead of killing the one who seeks his life, David stealthily cuts off the skirt of Saul's cloak as Saul does his business (1 Samuel 24: 1 ff). But as soon as Saul leaves the camp, David feels sorry for what he has done. He follows Saul out of the cave saying "My lord, the king! and he gives a lengthy speech which makes absolutely clear who he is ... and says, "My hand will not be against you." And Saul, being the bright visionary he is, says, "Is this your voice, my son, David?" It is a funny and poignant one liner after which we are told "Saul raised his voice and wept.... " Saul said, "You are more in the right than I...I know that you will surely be king...and now, swear to me, that you shall not cut off my seed"

Saul is a model of repentance throughout the scripture. He continues to seek to gain God's favor once again. And, yet, it never does come to pass. You already know how that request is honored: Saul's daughter, Michal, David's first wife is left in the palace, childless.

As we did with Michal when David left her in the palace, we ask where is God? And, once again, the answer isn't in a theophany or a reversal of the Spirit of God. Saul's fate was sealed long ago. However, and this is important, while the Spirit of God is said to have left Saul, the scripture has not. The Word of God has not left Saul behind.

It is Saul's last night on earth. Samuel through the ghostwife at Endor has made it clear that this battle would be his last. Saul, upon hearing the news, falls prostrate onto the ground. He cannot find the energy to rise. But this woman who is able to call up spirits is able, with the help of his servants, to sit him up, to bring him to her table. As he sits, frozen, she goes and prepares for him a

feast, killing the fatted calf, and forming bread from flour. It is the prodigal son welcomed home; it is the expensive oil poured over Jesus; it is wasteful extravagance spilled out on one who shouldn't matter. Poured out on one who doesn't deserve God's blessing...poured out on one who is foolish...poured out on one who was caught with his pants down...poured out on one who never had David's ability to see faithfully...poured out....

Poured out for me and for you.

I confess, while in worship I can feel like David—I think that's why we worship--in much of my life I feel more like Saul, trying to feel my way forward, impatiently trying to figure out God's desire, wondering where is God's Spirit? In this "confession" I confess to nothing more than being human. We all have our share of Saul's spirit.

The woman of Endor lovingly serves Saul the best she has.

The next morning, Saul is gone and so is the fatted calf. The kitchen still smells of the meal. The dirty dishes are all around. But there is no pondering of the question, did he deserve it? That question is not for us to decide but it is one God decides on the night when the star shines over Bethlehem...the one Jesus, son of David, decides on the night he climbs Calvary.