

## **THE REAL QUESTION IS ARE WE ON GOD'S SIDE?**

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Before I go into today's sermon I wanted to take just a moment to talk about the passages we will be hearing over the next few months. The General Convention of 2006 passed a resolution to make the Revised Common Lectionary the standard for our Sunday services. We instituted that change when I began here in December of 2007 which was the recommended starting date. The lectionary is where the readings we do on Sunday come from. It is a three year cycle and we are in Year B right now. Each year focuses on a different Gospel, but the change in the RCL is what we read from the Hebrew Scriptures.

Today's passage from the Hebrew Scriptures is a good example of why General Convention passed the resolution and I was eager to make the change. The story of David and Goliath, which proceeds today's passage and is also a selection we can read as well as most of the story of David, is not in the Episcopal Lectionary that you will find in the back of your prayer books. Knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures is critical if we are to understand the world that Jesus lived in. His message is tailored to people steeped in the Hebrew tradition. We risk missing the context of Jesus' message when we ignore or skip over these stories. As with last summer I will spend quite a few Sundays over this season after Pentecost preaching on the Hebrew Scriptures.

David is one of the truly epic characters of the Hebrew Scriptures. In literary terms the stories are legends and the entire account is one of the great sagas of the Old Testament. We began the story last week with the anointing of David by Samuel. There are several themes that are important and run throughout this story and others. David is the youngest. Peterson in his translation we read at the Children's Service last week referred to David as the "runt." This theme continues to play out this week. The theme centers on God using the least likely candidate to do his work. In ancient societies the heir and most important child was always the oldest son. The father had only one blessing to give and traditionally the oldest son would receive it. Yet time and again we see the younger son as the chosen and this is true with David.

As David goes out to face Goliath we see a classic struggle of the great and powerful against the small and weak. Goliath was between 7 feet and 10 feet tall depending on the version of the story you read. David is so small that when Saul gives him his armor he cannot wear it for it is too large and too heavy. So David faces the heavily armored and heavily armed Goliath with nothing but a shepherd's sling. By the way one of the programs on A&E tested the power of that sling and it could in fact at least stun a man if not kill him.

This is all set up to make the point that there is no way David should be the victor. The success is that in all of this David is faithful in ways that Saul was not. Saul had lost God's blessing because at a critical moment in battle he did not trust that Samuel would arrive in time and went ahead against the prophet's strict instructions. In other words Saul did not put his full trust in God. When God did not act the way Saul expected or wanted Saul took things into his own hands. David is clearly shown in these stories as having total and complete trust that God will work God's will through him and keep him safe. David has been anointed by Samuel to replace Saul and now is his time to come forward.

That is what has happened up to the point of today's reading. If you have not read the story recently I would encourage you to go back and read the entire David and Goliath story for just about everybody knows or thinks they know the story.

Our reading picks up with the scene where David is brought into Saul's presence after the battle. He is introduced to Saul, which is strange since Saul gave him his armor to wear earlier in the story. But that is an example of one of the inconsistencies that run throughout the Hebrew Scriptures in particular.

By the way when people talk about the inerrancy or scripture they mean there are none of these contradictions or other issues and I really do not see how we can say this. This entire story comes from what is probably three different sources and the redactors, those who edited the story, often just combined the stories and made no attempt to smooth out these problems. They simply left them in there for us to contend with.

The point is that David is able to do what Saul could not do, which is conquer the Philistines, because he puts his trust not in human devices, but in God's power. Because of this he prospers. This is emphasized as David gains in power and authority in the today's readings. David (not Jonathan Saul's son and heir by the way) is given command of an army and goes out to finish the conquest. In an interesting omission to the reading today they skip the part where on David's triumphal return the women proclaim that Saul has killed his thousands, but David has killed his ten thousands. He is more successful than Saul ever was and this sets up the jealousy with Saul that causes him to try to pin David to the wall with a spear not once, but twice.

God has removed his protection from Saul and so Saul is tormented by demons to the point of insanity. David however has a series of brushes with death at the hands of Saul, but always survives. Again this is because he is the anointed one.

Now there is a problem with some of this message when it is taken out of the context of the ancient world. This passage is clearly saying that David is successful because he has been chosen, some would say he is successful because God is on his side.

Appropriating the God is on our side from this ancient theology is dangerous. The understanding then was that this type of contest is not just between David and Goliath or the Philistines and the nation of Israel, but between YHWH and the gods of the Philistines. Monotheism was not as developed then as it is now. Monotheism in the time of David did not mean there was only one God. It meant that for the Jews there was only one God that they worshiped and followed. However their God YHWH was the most powerful God and would lead them in victory over the other Gods. Even in the time of Jesus many would not deny that the Roman gods existed, but that the God as understood Jews and the early Christians was the true God. Demon possession could come from worshipping foreign idols and Gods.

When we translate that into today's world we can run into trouble. It may be as simple as the team prayer for victory before a sporting event. I'm sorry, but I do not think that God worries about whose sports team is going to win. Of course then the other side is praying for victory as well. This reminds me of a T-shirt I saw once that said, "God may love you, but he likes me better." The fallacy of this was shown in the movie Bruce Almighty where Bruce who is substituting for God is overwhelmed by the volume of prayers and grants everybody their wish. The problem is that these means that every sporting event that day ended in a tie.

At the midweek bible study we were talking about this idea and I was reminded that in the American Civil War or as Miss Cora from Leesburg called it the late unpleasantness both sides believed and fought with the attitude that they were the instruments of God and that God was on their side.

This prompted one of my favorite quotes from Lincoln, "The question is not is God on our side, but are we on God's side?" This then prompts the question how do we know if we are on God's side? This is a critical question of discernment. How do we know if our actions are in accordance with God's will? The ultimate answer is to look at the fruits of the action. Is what we do consistent with what we have learned from Jesus. The question is what would Jesus expect us to do or ask us to do in his name. Are our actions consistent with the actions and teachings of Christ. If Jesus were standing here today in front of us would we be proud to tell him what we have done or would we find ourselves apologizing. This is the question we need to ask and answer!

The Hebrew Scriptures ultimately tell us of the development of the theology of the Jewish people from the time of Abraham until the time of Christ. They were not written to give us a factual history of the Jewish people, but to tell the story of how the understanding and relationship between God and the tribes of Israel developed. This theology was a work in progress throughout the Old Testament. All theology is a work in progress. The danger is when we take a theology out of its context and try to make it work in a world that exists 3000 years later which is the case in today's passage.

The kingdom is still in the process of coming and Lincoln's question is as valid today as it was in the 1860s. Our understanding of God is still growing and evolving. We must always remember that when we look to the bible for guidance. There is great guidance, but we must first do our homework and understand what the bible is telling us.

And to close I offer these words of Evelyn Underhill: "The coming of the Kingdom is perpetual. Again and again, freshness, novelty, power from beyond the world break in by unexpected paths bringing unexpected change. Those who cling to tradition and fear all novelty in God's relation to the world deny the creative activity of the Holy Spirit, and forget that what is now tradition was once innovation; that the real Christian is always a revolutionary, belongs to a new race, and has been given a new name and a new song."