

David Becomes King – July 5, 2015

2 Samuel 5

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When I was in the eighth grade, I had an English teacher who saw something in me that I had yet to recognize. I knew that I had an innate talent for writing but was impatient with my progress. I was never happy with what I produced, and always demanded more from myself. In my yearbook that year, she included a simple phrase – one that I didn't quite understand until much later – "Take time to smell the roses."

Now, one of my favorite things to do is to travel on back roads. Yes, it takes longer to get where you're going, but that no longer matters to me. For three out of the last four years, I have attended leadership events at the Presbyterian Conference Center in Montreat, North Carolina, just outside of Asheville. It's an absolutely beautiful area year round, but add the colors of the fall leaves on the mountains, and it is truly inspiring. I have made a practice of driving from Montreat to spend a few days on the south side of the Smokey Mountain National Park via the Blue Ridge Parkway.

What I love about the parkway is not only are you enveloped by the colors of the mountains around you, but every so often there a pull-off, where you can stop, physically get out of the car, and breathe in the majesty of creation. There is something about those views of creation that cause you to forget everything that demands your attention and live simply in that particular moment. To consider things that are often hidden by the distractions of hectic lives.

Our text from 2 Samuel is like that. On first reading, the passage seems rather mundane – a telling of part of Israel's history of the transition in the leadership from Saul, who had died in battle, to David, who had been destined to lead Israel from back in his youth when he was discovered by the prophet Samuel as God's chosen king, despite his lowly status as a shepherd boy. David has already been leading the southern tribe of Judah as its king in the town of Hebron, but now the northern tribes want him to lead them as well. David makes a covenant with them and then moves in and conquers the city of Jerusalem to be the base of his operations. The text reads like a boring history book – facts, figures, places – but not much action.

But this text is more than that. In his book *Leap Over a Wall*, Eugene Peterson compares it to one of those roadside vistas where you pull off and take in the view. This moment in the history of the Hebrew people is a profound one. Its history and trajectory are about to experience a major transition. They finally get the king they have been longing for. But what about Saul, he was king, wasn't he? What's so special about David?

Saul started out okay, but lost sight of God. He made decisions based on what he thought was right, even if they were in opposition to what God commanded. And so when David was still just a boy, God saw in him what Saul lacked – a devotion to following God – as so God claimed him as Israel's true king. Years passed. David began his rise to power, first by slaying the Philistine Goliath, and then by serving as a leader in Saul's army. Battles were fought, both externally and internally. And for years, David even had to live as an exile when Saul wanted him dead. There was instability and division and assassinations.

And during it all, David's leadership abilities became apparent to the northern tribes. At the age of 37 he had already been king of Judah for seven years, when the elders of the north came to him. David was confident in God's power and loyal to God's will. He was well-liked and considerate. And he was devoted to his friends and respectful of his enemies. But one quality stands out in the passage. The tribal leaders told him – "we are your bone and flesh." He was one of them. Coming from a lowly position in life – the youngest son in a large family and a simple shepherd boy – he understood the common people. He was authentic and he made mistakes. But he was willing to change or make amends when needed. He wasn't self-serving or caught up in his own power, instead, he relied solely on God and following God's will. He could follow the will of God, because he lived a life of devotion and prayer, writing many of the psalms in the Old Testament. Yes, he was brutal and shrewd with hands stained with the blood of the dead. But life in the Iron Age was often brutal.

David agreed to be king over all the tribes in Israel and made a covenant with them. He promised to be a shepherd king to them, to lead them with their best interests at heart. A shepherd cares for the flock and protects them from harm. A shepherd considers the good of the entire flock not just a few. David made this covenant with them before God – one not to be taken lightly.

One of his first acts as king was to move the center of power. He currently ruled in Hebron, which was south in the territory of Judah. The other tribes were all in the north. In an act of drawing the sides together, David decided to move the center of power to a more central location. There was a city that had not received much attention in the biblical story, but that was about to change.

David set his sights on Jerusalem that was currently under the control of the Jebusites. They must have been living under a rock up to this time, because when David came with his army, the Jebusites responded with taunts and derision. In short order, David's army defeated the locals and established the center of power for the united tribes of Israel. It came to be known as the "City of David."

Conquering Jerusalem and establishing it as the capital was a brilliant move on David's part. Jerusalem was also located in a defensible area – on a hill ringed by a valley and then several other hills. A location not conducive to surprise attacks. But more importantly to the morale of the people, the city was a neutral area among the tribes of Israel. Neither side could claim it, and so neither side could boast having more power. Also geographically it was centrally located. All the tribes could travel to it relatively easily.

This establishment of Jerusalem of the capital shows David understands the dynamics of human nature. While he could have easily remained in Hebron, it wasn't the smart thing to do.

This unification of all 12 tribes was a transition. It was time for a new start in a new place, where neither side could hold onto or claim special privilege or status. Of course, human nature being what it is, it's not hard to imagine the southern tribe consciously or unconsciously imagining a special relationship to a king from their own tribe, it didn't take long for the kingdoms to split again, but that story comes later. Inequality begets division, rightfully so.

In some ways I wonder if this is illustrative of the current issue surrounding the confederate flag in the south. No one can seem to agree on what the flag represents, let alone allow for respectful dialogue – so while some demand its removal as a symbol of division, others cling to it as a symbol of pride in heritage. It seems to me that this

and other issues that expose inequality among people in our nation will continue to disrupt any hope of a peaceful resolution or unity.

A final point from this passage comes from the last verse, that reads “David became greater and greater, for the Lord, the God of Hosts, was with him. When David assumed the kingship of all the tribes of Israel, that wasn’t the end. He hadn’t “arrived” to coast through the remainder of his life. That was Saul’s downfall. The words “greater and greater” refer to David’s ongoing relationship with God. He didn’t stop praying. He didn’t stop listening. He didn’t stop discerning. His life journey was to follow God. For certain, he blew it a few times, but he was always willing to come back to the right path. He was always ready to look for God in his life. And in the end, that’s what made him a great leader.

David remains a good role model for us in our own lives of faith. We can relate to him in many ways. He came from humble beginnings and had no delusions about his own worth. He had many innate gifts for leadership, but by far, his desire to follow God was the most important.

Jesus was often called the Son of David – he came from David’s lineage. But he also modeled a life of obedience to the will of God. Our job as his followers is to follow the model he has given to us as shown in the gospels. Following him is not always the easy way or the popular way. In fact, to follow his calls to justice and mercy and love of enemy may stir others against us. We may have to take a stand that is in opposition to the status quo, and in fact, if we are truly modeling his life, we definitely will face hostility, and that takes courage and a willingness to move toward what is right rather than what is popular.

Jesus told his disciples that the message of the gospel will not always be welcomed or received. In those cases, we are called not to argue or retaliate – but instead to move on, metaphorically shaking the dust from our clothing. As we grow into deeper relationship to God, following where Christ leads us, we will find ourselves moving farther away from worldly pursuits. May we follow the path of Christ in the same way that David followed God’s will – with passion, devotion and lifelong persistence.