

GOOD KING DAVID



2 Samuel 1:1, 17-27: "After the death of Saul, when David had returned from defeating the Amalekites, David remained two days in Ziklag. David intoned (there) this lamentation over Saul and his son Jonathan. He ordered that The Song of the Bow be taught to the people of Judah."

In this age of acrimonious politics in a bitterly divided nation, there are many who are hearkening back for a simpler time, longing to return to the good ole days, which are more favorably remembered than our current climate. But sadly, our memories, like our histories, are often distorted, written by the victors, who tend to remember the good things of the past and try to forget the rest, as recently exemplified by the lesser-known stories of the Tulsa Massacre or the Juneteenth

celebration. Indeed next Sunday we will celebrate our American Independence Day, where we will celebrate "patriots," who at the time others called "treasonous revolutionaries," as we tend to forget how divided this country was at the time of the War for Independence. We forget how many Americans actually fought for the British crown and not for our independence, or the many who simply fled to Canada or the West Indies, as most of the Anglican clergy did. We often view the past with rose-tinted glasses --- as so many people do, for example, with those good ole days of Good King David's reign of the people of Israel, when the prophet Samuel, a man of God anointed David king, who then brought peace and prosperity to his people and was admired and accepted by all. Only that is not how it really happened. We all need to review our history carefully to really understand who were are and where we've come from.

Remember the Prophet Samuel tried to dissuade the elders of Israel from wanting a king in the reading from the Hebrew Scriptures three weeks ago, but reluctantly the Lord gave in and Samuel was directed to anoint Saul as the first King of Israel. Saul ruled for 40 years, we are told. Two weeks ago the reading from the Old Testament mentioned how the Lord was sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel, without telling us the stories of why, and then proceeded with the lovely story about how David was chosen by God as Saul's successor, from among the eight sons

of Jesse, calling them up one by one, and reminding us all how God does not look upon outward appearance as we mortals do.

That beloved story of the anointing of David, like last week's cherished story of David and Goliath, are often all that is remembered from David's ascendancy to the throne. But the real story of David's rise to power revealed in the rest of the Scriptures, those that are not read on Sunday mornings, paints a very different picture indeed. In the end, those beloved stories of David's anointing and his battle with Goliath may be more legendary than historical, more the remembered lionization by later generations of their great hero David; like the stories we tell of George Washington cutting down the cherry tree. One of the clearest signs that David's killing of Goliath in last week's story may be more legend than fact is the casual mention in 2 Samuel, chapter 21, verse 19, which nonchalantly informs us that one Elhanan killed Goliath of Gath, not David.

In addition, there is a conflict in the biblical stories about how and when King Saul first met David. In last week's lovely story, David, a simple shepherd boy had left the family's herd as his father Jesse directed him and taken some food to his three oldest brothers, who are fighting against the Philistines in King Saul's army. King Saul, we are told here, was already old and advanced in years. In the verses after last week's reading, after David comes out of nowhere and slays Goliath,

King Saul asks his General who is this young man? Because neither of them knew who David was.

But wait a minute, in the chapter immediately before that one, in the verses after the story of Samuel choosing David from among the sons of Jesse, we are told that an evil spirit began to torment King Saul, such that his servants were sent to look for someone who was skillful in playing the lyre; and they brought David to live within the king's household, so when the evil spirit came upon King Saul, David played his lyre, and Saul would calm down. We are told there that King Saul loved David greatly, and that he even became Saul's armor-bearer. However, in the very next chapter, King Saul and his General don't know who David is after he kills Goliath. So, what's the real story here?

While David served in King Saul's court, he befriended King Saul's son, Jonathan, heir to the throne, and they became the best of friends; some say even that they became lovers. David was also later married to Michal, Saul's daughter, and then he commanded a part of Saul's army, where he became so successful as a military leader that the popular chant of the day was "Saul killed his thousands, (while) David (killed) his tens of thousands". David's growing popularity threatened Saul, who tried himself to kill David while he was living in the Royal Palace several times in several different ways, twice famously

throwing a spear across the room and just missing him. Saul had some anger issues.

With Jonathan's and Michal's help, David escaped the palace and lived for many years in the wilderness with a band of about 400 brigands, a small personal army, who hired themselves out as mercenaries and often fought on the side of the Philistines in battles against Israel; and who as a group of outlaws survived by pillaging local villages, by killing all the men, women and children and then taking their sheep, oxen, and camels as reward, even pillaging some Israelite villages. This is 'good King David' the hero of the Israelites?

Saul's army tried for years to tract down the rebel David and his gang of terrorists but was never successful. On two occasions, however, David is famously presented with an opportunity to kill his adversary Saul, but refuses, perhaps again legendary elements later added to make David the brigand look good. Then came that big battle between Saul's forces and the mighty Philistines at Mt. Gilboa. David whose mercenaries were aligned with the Philistines at that time, are sent off by them to attack the Amalekites, perhaps because the Philistines don't quite trust David's loyalty to them in this battle against Saul. Even so, the Philistines were victorious in this conflict with the Israelites, and King Saul and his son Jonathan are killed in the attack. In today's reading David returns from his

battles to sing a beautiful dirge upon the death of King Saul and his son, Jonathan, his best friend. The question now is who becomes king of Judah with Saul and his eldest son dead?

Remember that David is married to one of Saul's daughters.

Remember David was supposedly anointed by the prophet Samuel years as king before. But alas Jonathan also had a brother, and a son of his own, who would be heirs to the throne before David.

In the Old Testament reading next week, David will convince the people of Hebron to crown him their king. After seven years as King of Hebron, David then conquered the Jebusites and took their famous fortress city, the city of Jerusalem, which had never been captured by the Israelites, and David made it his own capital, a wise political move since it was unaligned with any of the twelve tribes of Israel, building there a great Royal Palace for himself with the cedars of Lebanon. This was all part of a long civil war between David and Saul's other son, Ishbaal, as both Ishbaal and David now claimed to be King of Israel, a tale which ends with the assassination of Ishbaal by his own men because they thought it would please David. David continued to expand his power and territory, partly through clever marriages (he had at least 19 wives and concubines) and partly through ruthless military battles and political assassinations. Eventually after many, many years, King David united the scattered twelve tribes of Israel, something which King Saul had

failed to do, and together the tribes then defeated their long-time enemy, the Philistines, extending the nation's boundaries the farthest ever known, bringing peace and prosperity to the people in such a way that they never forgot, as they idolized good King David in a manner they have not done with any other leader.

Still good King David was no saint. He was a 'great sinner' in Father Gilpin's words in last week's sermon. David was a clever politician and a shrewd, if not ruthless, leader. At the end of July, we will hear the tragic story of Bathsheba and Uriah the Hittite. Then in mid-August, we will hear the story of the great rebellion of one of David's son, Absalom. And later when David becomes old and bedridden, another son Adonijah rebels and declares himself king in his place. Meanwhile Bathsheba and Solomon, fearing for their lives, devise a clever plan to convince the now senile David that he had previously promised Solomon the throne, which he hadn't, and Solomon eventually inherits the mantle of his father.

Solomon had even more wives and concubines than his dad (700 wives and 300 concubines), even more wealth, and was perhaps even more renown, but renowned for his wisdom not his bravery in battle or his political shrewdness. Solomon attracted the attention of other nations. Remember the royal visit of Queen Sheba. And it is wise King Solomon in the end, not good

King David, who built the first great Temple in Jerusalem, but Solomon's great public works required conscription, that is, they required the forced enslavement of his own people, who begin to complain and lament under the burden of these labors and his taxes, right up until upon Solomon's death. All those terrible prophecies from Samuel three weeks ago, of what would happen if the people of Israel got a king, come true under Solomon, and the country revolted into civil war again and divided the united tribes into two, the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah, never to be reunited again, such that that brief moment in the history of the Israel when they are united as a people under Good King David and Wise King Solomon, prosperous and at peace with their neighbors, is ended much too early. That is the story told this summer in the Old Testament readings, so I pray we listen carefully.

For years later, especially during their captivity in Babylon, the people of Israel will dream of returning to those good ole days. They will dream of a new Davidic King who will restore the fortunes of Zion and establish the Kingdom of God, dreams of an anointed one, a Son of David, a Messiah, a Savior. But alas the real story of David's reign is the all too familiar one of acrimonious politics and a bitterly divided nation, a story of violence and conflict, insurrection and treason, a story that mustn't be forgotten. Let us all be forewarned. AMEN.