

GOOD KING DAVID



1 Samuel 15:35 "The LORD said to Samuel, 'How long will you grieve over Saul? I have rejected him from being king over Israel. Fill your horn with oil and set out; I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons.'"

In this age of acrimonious politics and a bitterly divided nation, there are many who harken for a simpler time, longing for former days, which are always more favorably remembered than our current climate. Our memories, like our histories, are often distorted, written by the victors, who tend to remember the good

things and forget the rest. For example, soon we will celebrate our Independence Day, where we call those American revolutionaries, "patriots," and tend to forget how divided this country was at the time, or how many Americans actually fought for the British, or simply fled to Canada or the West Indies. We often view the past with rose-tinted glasses --- as we do, for example, with those good ole days of good King David's reign over 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's not how it really happened according to the biblical stories that are often skipped over in our Sunday readings.

Last week, Samuel tried to dissuade the elders of Israel from even wanting a king, but reluctantly the Lord gave in, and Samuel was directed to anoint Saul as the first King of Israel. Now the Lord was sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel, such that our lectionary proceeds with today's 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 do.

That beloved story of the choosing of David, like next 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, paints a **very** different picture. In the end, those beloved stories may be more legendary than historical, more the remembered lionization by later generations of their hero David; like the stories we tell of George Washington cutting down the cherry tree. One of the first signs that David's killing of Goliath in next week's story may be more legend than fact is the casual mention in 2 Samuel 21.19 that one Elhanan killed Goliath of Gath, not David.

In addition, there is a conflict in the biblical stories about how and when exactly King Saul first met David. In next week's story, David, a simple shepherd boy leaves the family's flock at his father Jesse's direction to take some food to his three oldest brothers who are fighting the Philistines in King Saul's army. David's brothers treat him there with some disrespect, as though they hadn't just witnessed Samuel anointing David as king. Meanwhile King Saul, we are told here, was already old and advanced in years. In the verses after next week's reading, after David comes out of nowhere and slays Goliath, King Saul asks Abner, his General, who is this young man? Because neither of them knew who David was (1 Sam. 17.55ff)

But wait a minute, in the chapter immediately before that one (1 Sam. 16.14ff), in the verses that follows today's story of Samuel choosing David from among the sons of Jesse, we are

told that an evil spirit began to torment King Saul, so 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?

While David served in King Saul's court, he befriended King Saul's eldest son, Jonathan, the heir to the throne, and they became the very best of friends, as there was an unbreakable bond of some kind between them. David also then married Michal, Saul's daughter, and then commanded a part of Saul's army, whereupon he was so successful that the popular chant of the day was "Saul killed his thousands, (but) David (killed) his tens of thousands". David's growing popularity clearly threatened Saul, who tried several times to kill David while he was living in the Royal Palace, twice famously throwing a spear across the room and just missing him. Saul clearly had anger issues, and maybe jealousy issues as well.

With Jonathan's and Michal's help, David finally escaped the palace and lived for many years in the wilderness with a gathered band of about 400 brigands, a small personal army, who

as mercenaries sometimes fought on the side of the Philistines in battles; and who survived by pillaging local villages, by killing all the men, women and children and taking their sheep, oxen, and camels as reward, even pillaging some villages in Israel. Saul's army tried for years to track down 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 added later to make David the outlaw look good. David and his gang eventually tired of being constantly chased by Saul's army and they all fled to the Philistine capital of Gath and served King Achish there. Then came that big battle between Saul's forces and the mighty Philistines at Mt. Gilboa. David and his mercenaries were aligned with the Philistines at this time and mustered with the Philistine forces as they prepared to go to battle, but they are sent off by them to attack the Amalekites instead, perhaps because the Philistines don't quite trust David's loyalty to them in this battle. Even so, the Philistines are victorious in this conflict with the Israelites, and King Saul and his son Jonathan are killed in the battle. In the reading in two weeks' time, David returns from his fight with the Amalekites 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 Israel with Saul and his eldest son

dead? Remember that David was married to one of Saul's daughters, but she was childless. Remember David was supposedly anointed by the prophet Samuel years before. But Jonathan also had a brother, and a son of his own so that King Saul's lineage continued.

In the Old Testament reading in three weeks' time, 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. Then came a period of civil war between David and Saul's other son, Ishbaal, as both Ishbaal and David wanted to be King of all Israel, a tale which ends with the assassination of Ishbaal by his own men because they thought it would please David. David slowly 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 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.

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 the Kingdom of God, and rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. They will dream of an anointed one, 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 great violence and a struggle for power. So let us all take off our rose-tinted glasses and get real. AMEN.