

DAVID AND SAUL

**Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Lindley G. DeGarmo
Union Church of Pocantico Hills
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Psalm 23

1 Samuel 18:5-16

The traffic was heavy on Main Street one late afternoon during rush hour. A man was being tailgated by a stressed-out woman. Suddenly, the light in front of him turned yellow. He did the right thing by hitting his brakes and stopping right behind the crosswalk, even though he could have floored the gas and beaten the red light. The tailgating woman had been hoping to make it through that intersection with the man in front of her. When he stopped, she hit the roof and the horn at the same time pounding her fist on the steering wheel and screaming in frustration. In the middle of her rant, she heard a tap-tap on her window. She stopped and looked up into the face of a very serious police officer. The officer asks her to exit the car and put her hands on the roof. He takes her down to the police station where she is searched, fingerprinted, photographed, and put into a cell. After a couple of hours, a policeman comes to her cell, opens the door, and escorts her back to the booking desk where the arresting officer is waiting with her personal effects.

He says, “I’m so sorry for the mistake. You see, I pulled up behind your car while you were honking your horn, making obscene gestures, and cussing a blue streak at the man in front of you. I noticed the “God Loves You” frame around your license plate, the “What Would Jesus Do” bumper sticker, and the First Presbyterian decal in the window. Naturally, I assumed you had stolen the car.”

We need always to remember that our faith must make a difference in how we live in the world. This wonderful gospel must go from pulpit to pew to pavement. No one helps us do this better than the Old Testament figure of David. David’s life was full of God. Everywhere David looked he saw the presence of God. As I’ve been preparing this series of sermons about David, I’ve been thinking a lot about him as I go about my daily business. You might want to try this. As I’ve been driving in my car or sitting on a Zoom call, I’ve asked myself, “What would David do?” It’s even occurred to me that asking “What would David do?” may be more helpful than asking—as we are sometimes urged to do—“What would Jesus do?” Let me tell you why: unlike Jesus, David was a sinner like you and me. As I’ve mentioned before, David is one of the few heroes of the Bible characters who didn’t personally experience a miracle. There is no recorded miracle in David’s life. That makes me say, there’s a life that’s possible for me. A wonderful life full of wonder and joy lived in the presence of God.

David had a powerful sense of God’s calling in his life. You may think of your work as your calling. Someone has said there are two kinds of people: there are called people and there are driven people. So, let me ask you this very personal question, “Are you driven or are you called?” There was never a more driven personality than King Saul.

What was it that drove Saul? There was a consistent pattern in Saul's life. Look back at his embarrassing meltdown in the tent as Goliath taunted the armies of Israel. I Samuel 17:11 says, "*Saul (was) terrified.*" Fear drove Saul. It wasn't just a fear of giants. No sooner did David kill Goliath than Saul was now afraid of David.

But there is another great driving force in Saul's life, and it emerges clearly in this morning's lesson from I Samuel Chapter 18. It comes right on the heels of David's triumph over Goliath. It is envy. After the fall of Goliath and the defeat of the Philistines, the people pour into the street singing and dancing. David, the conquering hero, returns to a ticker tape parade. As the army enters the city trailing clouds of glory, the women along the roadside take up a chant they probably made up on the spot. "*Saul has slain his thousands and David his tens of thousands.*" All they mean by this is "What a team: Saul and David! What a great one-two punch we have defending our nation: Saul and David. Thank you, God, for this blessing."

But Saul's vanity is wounded. The sad thing about envy is that it always strikes at the pinnacle of someone else's success. We rain on their parade. At the moment when the champagne corks are popping and congratulations are being given, you're sitting in the corner with your teeth clenched. Envy is the sin of losers. It's the sin that no one will own up to. If you say to someone, "You're envious, aren't you?" the response will be, "Me? Are you kidding? Don't make me laugh." As someone once said, there are no songs about envy. There are gluttony songs, lust songs, and pride songs, but no one sings about envy. However, in this case Saul turns the celebration of his people into a song of envy.

Being realistic, Saul may have had reason for concern. This is not totally irrational. With all his new star power, David could become a rival of Saul if he chose to do so. But David is a called person and Saul has no clue of the inner workings of a called person. Look at what Saul does next.

Saul begins a series of six attempts on David's life. First Saul explodes in a fit of rage and he hurls his javelin at David while David plays the harp. Later, he conspires to have David hung out to dry on the battlefield in a lopsided combat against the Philistines. Finally, Saul's rage congeals into official state policy as he sends out Israel's armies to hunt down and kill David. For the next twenty years, David is in the wilderness running for his life.

One day, King Saul learns of David's whereabouts and leads an army of 3,000 men to a place called En Gedi. On the journey, Saul goes into a cave, and I quote, "to relieve himself." Unbeknownst to Saul, David and his men are already hiding in that very cave. This is a very vulnerable moment for Saul as the king is on his throne. David's men say, "Psst, David, this is your chance. Finish him off." David sneaks up behind the King and snips off a piece of Saul's robe. When Saul is far away on a ridge across the valley, David waves that piece of the robe and yells, "Your highness, I could have killed you. I am your loyal subject. Please call off your army."¹

This was a very significant incident. More than any other, this shows David's character and his worthiness to be king. Think about it. It was through David's restraint and gentleness that he showed his readiness to take over the reins of power. Here we see

¹ I Samuel 24:1-15.

a biblical seminar on success. If you are a young person eager to make it up the ladder, God is telling you to humble yourself so that he may exalt you. David could even see the holiness of God in a man like Saul. He really did love his enemy. The scriptures tell us that David felt as if he had done something terrible when he defaced Saul's robe in the cave. When Saul died, David wept. Today we call it "respect for the office." It's been in very short supply in our nation in recent years.

God was ready to elevate David to power when he showed reverence for his opponent. What if Democrats were to show reverence for Republicans and Republicans show reverence for Democrats? In our lives we need to reverence our adversaries in business, in law, and in academics. As a Christian, don't go for the jugular. Just snip off a piece of their robe. Allow God to fight your battles like David did.

As a called person, David surrendered to God's time table. Imagine the temptation David must have had in the cave. He had been secretly anointed king by the prophet Samuel and now was being hunted like an animal. David didn't know where he was going to sleep from one night to the next. How easy it would have been to succumb to the temptation to finish off Saul right then and there. But, it was not God's timing for Saul to be removed, and David surrendered to God's sovereignty.

By contrast, as a driven person, Saul lived making every decision for himself by himself. Saul was not only driven by fear and envy but also by ego. Someone has said, in the word 'EGO' the letters E-G-O stand for "Edging God Out." That's why there is so much relentless pressure on driven people to do more and more and more all the time. It's especially hard to climb the ladder of success when you're also trying to keep your nose to the grindstone, your shoulder to the wheel, your eye on the ball, and your ear to the ground. But we've all been there, haven't we; feeling like everything depends on us?

We know from Scripture that Saul started out as one of those people for whom things came easy. Saul would walk into a room and heads would turn. He looked impressive, tall, and stately, just like a king. Sometimes the mixed blessing of looking impressive on the outside results in an undeveloped character on the inside. During the early years of King Saul's reign, things went fabulously well. Saul experienced one success after another, but he never learned to depend upon God. As a result, Saul never really got to know God.

I think that's one of the keys to understanding Saul. For Saul, the king thing was all about Saul. But, Saul was not really the first king of Israel. Before Saul became king, Israel had had a king who was God himself. When the people noted the powerful Philistine nation next door, they panicked. They saw how other nations had kings who could conscript soldiers and command armies and decided they needed a king, too. So they said, "Samuel, give us a king. We've got to have a king like other nations." God told Samuel, "They are rejecting me as their king." Saul's tragic downfall was that he believed he was taking over from God as the King of Israel. Imagine saying, "God had this job, gave it his best shot, and now it's my turn." Talk about big shoes to fill.

Listen carefully friends, your job pressures and burdens may be lifted from you this very morning. As a called person, David never saw himself as King over Israel. David put on that crown as a way of restoring God's kingship over his nation.

In fact, when David was installed as king over Israel they bent over backwards not to use the K-word. God says, “You shall be shepherd of my people, Israel, and you shall be prince over Israel.”² With David on the throne, God ruled again over the nation of Israel. The people said, “David, be our shepherd. It was when you were a young shepherd boy that we first fell in love with you. Stay in touch with your roots, David. Tenderly lead and nurture this nation, and we will be your loyal sheep.”

And David responds in his most famous poem: *The Lord is my Shepherd*. David says, “As the Lord shepherds me, I will shepherd you.” Isn’t that how you want to lead your organization, the people who report to you, your students, or your family? Don’t you want to be a tender shepherd who is being led in all you do by the Great Shepherd?

David was called and anointed for God to lead through God. If we were together in person this morning, I would ask each of you to come forward and I would anoint you with oil just as Samuel did to David. It would remind you that you, too, are called to exercise God’s rule in God’s world with God’s power and in God’s way. When you can say, “The Lord is my shepherd,” then you’re ready to be a shepherd.

When you can say, “The Lord is my CEO,” then you’re ready for the top job in the organization. When you can say, “The Lord is my teacher,” then you’re ready to have a class full of students. When you can say, “The Lord is my judge,” then you’re ready for an appointment to the bench, and not until.

During this past week, I’ve been thinking personally about the issue of being called and being driven. I have to confess to you that I’m a combination of Saul and David. You might say, “I’m *c’riven*.” I am both called and driven. I start out called in the morning, and by most afternoons, I’m driven. Only when I find a way throughout the day to keep coming back to my shepherd, can I remain called. We need the living, daily, presence of God in our lives to keep us continually called and not depressingly driven.

David teaches us the interesting truth that the most important part of reality is invisible. It’s the people who spend most of their time in the invisible world who wind up being most effective in the visible world. We often talk about people who are so heavenly minded that they are no earthly good. But, friends, the exact opposite is true. It is the people who are most heavenly minded who do the most earthly good. The apostle Paul said, “We look to the things that are unseen because the things that are seen are passing away, and the things that are unseen are eternal.”

The most important thing you have going for you is not your job, your car, your house, or even a body as impressive as Saul’s. The best thing you can have is the living daily presence of God in your life. Oh, friends, if you’re a shepherd, you need a shepherd. May you say with David, “The Lord is my shepherd.”

To the Lord our God, Alpha and Omega, be all glory and honor forever. Amen.

² II Samuel 5:2 [RSV].