

June 14, 2015

Proper 6

Many of our summer readings will be from the Books of Samuel. These histories of the Hebrew tribes were the first written books of the Bible. Genesis- with the Garden of Eden, the Fall, and the Flood- was written later, to give the Hebrew people creation stories, like the ones their neighbors had, to tell their children and grandchildren. They are primeval accounts of origin.

The accounts of Saul, David, and Solomon in the books of Samuel have X-rated material, or at least R, parental discretion advised. They are centered on tribal warfare and warlords- lust, love, envy, betrayal, and forgiveness. Toward the beginning is David - forebear of Jesus, lover of Bathsheba, betrayer of Uriah, - sinful, penitent, forgiven David, composer of prayer and psalms. The first followers of Christ said of Jesus, He is a son of David.

It all begins in today's reading when Samuel went to Jesse to find a successor to the warlord Saul. Jesse presented his seven oldest and strongest sons. Samuel said, "Are all your sons here?" Jesse said, Oh, there's one more, the last. He's out keeping the sheep. Samuel said, "Bring him". He looked into his eyes, and said "He's the one."

God often chooses the last, and left over- Joseph of the multicolored dreamcoat was the last of twelve brothers, and abandoned in a pit. Moses was left in the bulrushes; Jesus born in a stable. "How odd of God to choose the Jews," is a pithy saying to remind us how grace works; and how odd the choices of some particular Jews. How odd of God to choose the mustard seed, Jesus goes on to say- the smallest of all seeds, yet when grown puts forth rich branches with shade and shelter.

David emerges. In his first telling act, he takes bread and cheese to the warlord Saul, who is fighting the Philistines with heavy armor. David convinces Saul that, as David has protected his sheep against bears, he can protect Saul and the Israelites against the great bear Goliath. Saul suits up David in heavy armor. David takes off the armor and goes forth with a slingshot. You know the rest of the story from Sunday School and countless pictures. Little David fells Goliath and inspires the Israelites against the Philistines.

I recently encountered a famous statue of David, of which you've probably seen pictures: Michelangelo's David in Italy. I first saw a splendid replica. I walked with a friend to a courtyard where we knew the replica stood. I said, "Wow, that's something. I'm glad I've seen that". My friend said, "No, no. You have to go see the original." He was right for more reasons than I expected.

I waited in line, paid my \$20 with all the other tourists, and entered an indoor museum that was like a basilica. At the end of a long nave was the statue, on a pedestal, bathed in light from the dome above. I approached, in a hushed atmosphere, as if nearing a holy site. The statue, the sculpture, is magnificent, gorgeous- a ten foot high young man with rippling thighs, broad chest, chin high, each eyebrow carved to perfection, one foot stepping confidently in front of another. If you walked round behind, cupped in a hand behind one of those thighs- almost entirely out of sight- was a small slingshot.

The Biblical story was almost forgotten. It was as if Michelangelo said, "O yeah, I have to put that slingshot in there somewhere, I'll tuck it out of sight." When I left the museum and was walking outside on the street, an unexpected sadness, quite profound, came over me. My thoughts, when they came- you know how strong emotions precede thoughts- my thoughts inadvertently went to someone I know who was a beautiful athlete, and now struggles with an illness; to a neighbor, out of job, whose daughter came home from marital troubles; to families I see during the week walking through our parking lot on the way to Hannaford. From sadness, I went to anger. Damn it Michelangelo, life isn't that way. Or when it is, ever so briefly. David was a scrawny kid. He would have his moments of glory; he also beat his chest with grief. As Zorba said, "Life is struggle, only death is not." What should be at the end of the nave is a communion table, where we gather to be blessed however we can make it; and who's not limping?

When we gather, we walk by faith more than sight, by faith in what God can do for us that we can't do alone. We are the mustard seed, small on our own, when nurtured in God's care, flowers in grace with branches that give shelter, and glory, to many.