

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
Dan Krebill, co-pastor

March 26, 2017
4th Sunday in Lent
1 Samuel 16:1-13

The Shepherd King

As we enter into this fourth Sunday in Lent, we've moved into the second half of this journey toward the cross—the cross, as we'll recall, on which Jesus died, as well as the cross that stands empty on Easter Sunday. Journey is an oft-used metaphor to describe and explain this 6-week countdown (or should I say count up) to the pinnacle of our Christian pilgrimage.

For many people, myself included, when embarking on a trip with a particular destination, the traveling details are as much a part of the experience as is what experiences lie at the destination. For those who take vacations in the summertime, this is the time of year that many begin making their plans, arranging all of the various travel details. Lots of decisions must be considered.

How long will the trip be?

Will we drive or fly?

And if we drive, what route will we take—a quick and direct route, or a more scenic one that takes more time?

If it's a trip we've taken before, maybe there is an alternate route or another way to make the trip.

Will we camp along the way, stay with friends and relatives, or book a motel?

All those decisions are made in addition to the choice of what will be done at the destination itself. Some people excel at this kind of trip planning. Others can be undone by it and end up arranging for someone else to do the planning.

As we've been making our way in the 6-week Lenten journey, this year we've taken an alternate route on the way to Easter. Most years we have followed the familiar and well-traveled route that takes us there through the stories of Jesus as we have them in the New Testament gospels. It's often as if we're shadowing Jesus as he makes his way from Galilee to Jerusalem where he will face arrest, trial, torture and death. This year, while still headed to the same destination, we have taken the journey by way of the Hebrew scriptures—the Old Testament.

While at first it may appear that we're on a completely different journey, we've been suggesting that it's an alternate route. In this case, it's like we're zooming out on the story of God and God's people to look at it from a much longer vantage point. When we do that, we discover anew that the journey to the cross of Easter actually begins much sooner than the life of Jesus. It's a journey that has a point of origin that extends back to the beginning of creation itself. Along this journey we've been exploring some of the stories of how God has sought to restore the broken relationship with humanity by interacting with them along the way.

So today, we come to the seminal story of how David, the greatest king of Israel, came to that royal position from a most unlikely and lowly place.

It's a great story that has a Cinderella-esque feel to it. As we come into the story today, the prophet Samuel has been commissioned by God to identify the king of Israel and then to anoint him. Sounds simple enough. Samuel had already done this once before, so he could do it again. Except,

there's only one problem. Israel is not in need of a king yet. Samuel had already anointed a king, chosen by God, to be the first king that the Israelites so desperately had wanted for so long. His name was King Saul. And by all accounts, King Saul was in good health and stature and he wasn't thinking about the royal succession. And if he had thought about who his successor would be some day, that certainly would be his eldest son. Isn't that how this kingly monarchical system works?

But God had another idea.

Along the way, King Saul deviated from the path on which God had intended he walk as the King of Israel—in some cases, he willfully disobeyed God. In the chapter preceding the one from which our reading came, "The word of the Lord came to Samuel: 'I regret that I made Saul king, for he has turned back from following me, and has not carried out my commands. . . .' And the Lord was sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel." (1 Sam. 15:10-11, 35b)

But rather than dethrone King Saul right away, God instructs Samuel to carry out this task of identifying and then anointing the next King of Israel while King Saul is still on the throne. It was an idea that Samuel didn't like at all, knowing that if he was to be caught, what he is doing is treasonous punishable by death. God persists and Samuel acquiesces and once again does God's bidding.

Samuel goes to Bethlehem to the house of Jesse. For it is from among Jesse's sons that the next king will come. This is where the Cinderella-like aspect enters this story. Samuel meets each of the sons of Jesse, one by one, beginning with the oldest. While they look perfectly capable and well-suited to be king, the Lord keeps telling Samuel that he hasn't yet appeared in this line up.

Like the prince seeking to find the elusive maiden to fit the glass slipper that had been left behind at the ball with no success, so Jesse finds himself stymied after seeing the 7 sons of Jesse with no apparent King-designee. And like the prince who inquires as to whether there might be another maiden in the household to consider, Samuel asks Jesse, "Are all your sons here?"

Just as Cinderella is mentioned as a remote possibility that then leads to success in finding the one who fits the glass slipper, Jesse tells Samuel of his youngest son, David, who is out tending the sheep. As in many other places in the storyline of the Bible, it's this young boy, David, a shepherd, as unlikely as he appears, who is identified by Samuel as the one chosen by God. Samuel anoints David in the presence of his brothers, and the greatest King of Israel is put in place to assume the throne at an opportune time. Once again, the stage is set for a remarkable chapter in the story of God and of God's people.

This story of David becoming king is yet another event in the long story line of how God, over and over again, remains focused on the keeping the relationship with the people with whom God has made a covenant. When that covenant is severed or compromised by human pride and sinfulness—in this case by the disobedience of King Saul—God persists by opening a new way, a new chapter, thereby keeping the overall direction toward a restored relationship.

David is an unlikely agent. He is from the tiny backwater town of Bethlehem. He has no pedigree of note. He is young—an age in which he barely counts for anything. And to top it all off, he is a lowly shepherd—at or near the bottom in the hierarchy of respectable tasks or vocations.

Sometimes it's hard for us who read the Bible through the lens of the Easter story to grasp the remoteness of this event. That's because there is another man we know who came from that same little town of Bethlehem, from humble working class origins—that of a carpenter. This man became known as

a shepherd of sorts, for he was portrayed as one who guided and nurtured his followers in much the way that a shepherd guides and nurtures sheep. In fact he even described himself at times as the good shepherd. Jesus, the good shepherd, is to whom I'm referring. Sometimes he was even called the son of David.

I came across a story that points yet again to God intervening in the voids of our lives--this one from our era.

In August 1932, [Thomas Dorsey] and his wife, Nettie, who was pregnant with their first child, were living in a small apartment on Chicago's South Side. Reluctantly he left her there while he drove down Route 66 to St. Louis to serve as the featured soloist at a large revival meeting. The next evening, after being called on to sing again and again, he finally sat down and was handed a telegram. It bore four devastating words: "Your wife just died." After he made a quick phone call to confirm this tragic news, one of his friends drove him through the night back to Chicago, where he learned that his wife had given birth to a boy. Yet this brief hope was dashed when the child died the following evening. After burying his wife and son in the same casket, Dorsey, by his own report, "fell apart. For days I closeted myself. I felt that God had done me an injustice. I didn't want to serve Him any more or write gospel songs. I just wanted to go back to that jazz world I once knew so well" (Thomas A. Dorsey, "The Birth of 'Precious Lord.'" *Guideposts* 42, no. 8 (October 1987), 81 Large print edition.)

After a few days he allowed a friend, Theodore Frye, to take him to a neighborhood music school where he was left alone in a room with a piano.

It was quiet: the late evening sun crept through the curtained windows. I sat down at the piano, and my hands began to browse over the keys. Something happened to me then. I felt at peace. I felt as though I could reach out and touch God. I found myself playing a melody, one I'd never heard or played before, and words came into my head----they just seemed to fall into place. (Dorsey 1987, 81-82)

As has often happened in the history of the church's song, one person's grief has brought forth a text that has brought hope and comfort to many. (Carl P. Daw, Jr., *Glory to God: A Companion* © 2016 Carl P. Daw Jr., Westminster John Knox Press, p. 795)

The hymn note indicates at the bottom of the page that, Thomas Dorsey, who wrote the words to "Precious Lord, Take My Hand," "thought his fingers were playing new music, but they unlocked a deep memory of a tune almost a century old." (*Glory to God*, © 2013 Westminster John Knox Press, #834)

In this Lenten journey, we are headed toward the events of Holy Week and ultimately to Easter. For that we are grateful. The journey, ultimately, is leading us to home with God.

*Precious Lord, take my hand.
Take my hand, precious Lord,
lead me home.*