

HOW THE MIGHTY HAVE FALLEN

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

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Scripture: II Samuel 1:1, 17-27; Psalm 130

God never wanted Israel to have a king. The scriptures are clear about that much. It was Israel's desire to have one that got the best of them. They had king envy, seeing that all the other nations around them had a king and they did not. It frustrated Samuel no end. But God consoled Samuel saying, "It's not you they are rejecting, it's me. They want an earthly king, and I guess I'm chopped liver. So we'll give them a king and see how they like it."

So, God stepped aside and let the people have what they wanted. And Samuel anointed Saul as Israel's first king. But Saul's reign was a mixed bag. His military prowess was only passable, and by the end of his rule he was weak and unimpressive.

When David became king, Israel entered into a golden age, and the nation said, "Now that's more like it." "Saul has killed his thousands," they sang, "but David his ten thousands."¹ He was the best they would ever get as earthly kings go; better than any who followed, save one, a great-great grandson of David's who would come from the city of Bethlehem as David had.

David was the best of them all. Better than Saul, better than Ben Gurion, better than Meir, better than Sharon, better than Olmert. David was the finest of the kings God never wanted.

God never wanted a king because God knew what Lord Acton discovered, that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. That only one king does not corrupt and that is God alone. But Israel wanted a king, someone they could see and admire and show to other nations.

I suppose it's the trappings that are most seductive to kings and rulers; everyone bowing and scraping, the limousines, the aides de camp, the ability to make war or peace, to hold the welfare of the nation in your hands, to visit upon others death as a threat and as a promise. Those are *God's* powers alone, of course, and they suffer when given over to human hands. Which is why God never wanted a king for Israel.

Nonetheless kings, and presidents and prime ministers are here to stay and the story of David, the shepherd cum warrior, is an object lesson in power and what it does to you. No king better than David, ever.

Yet David was nothing if not human. You know the high points and low of his career. He slew Goliath, a boyhood triumph that created a myth of invincibility about him, a myth that even he came to believe. He was favored in Saul's court and fell in love with Saul's son, Jonathan. In David's lament, he cries,

How distressed I am for you, my brother Jonathan,
Greatly beloved were you to me;
Your love to me was wonderful,
Passing the love of women.

Still it was David who spied Bathsheba one day, taking the air, bathing on the roof of her house, and even though she was married to a general in David's army, Uriah, David had to have her. He sent for her, an afternoon's delight, and possessed her for himself. Then he plotted her husband's murder, a shameless show of power for a strong and determined man like David to force his will on a woman who was in no position to deny him. What was a woman to say to a king who could have anything he wanted and who held the power of life and death over her? It might have been love, it might have been rape - he says, she says - and it depends on who's interpreting the story, don't you know.

Sexual misconduct in high places began long before Marilyn sang "Happy Birthday" to JFK, or Monica visited Bill in the President's lavatory. Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely at every level. Kings are a mixed bag, you know, even the best of them are so.

There is, however, this to say in his favor, when David sings a song of lament for Saul's death and his friend Jonathan's demise, it is the heartfelt and eloquent prayer of a man who is broken, who realizes that he, too, will die, and that two men who have meant everything to him as mentor and enemy and soul mate are gone.

Walter Brueggemann, the Old Testament scholar, says "One of the remarkable things about David is the ability of his spirit to soar to great heights of creative expression at moments of profound meaning in his life or in that of the nation. Scoundrel that he could be, . . . David was nonetheless capable of deep insights into the meaning of human life and into the implications for human[s] of the presence of the God of Israel."²

It was David who took Israel and routed its enemies and danced before the ark as it returned to Jerusalem, David who rebuilt the temple, David who scattered Israel's enemies, David who wrote the greatest poetry in the scriptures, the psalms of the height and depth and breadth of God's love. No greater king than David.

But for all of that, for all the laudable and gracious things there are to say about King David, David reminds us that every king is flawed, that even the greatest among them falters, and that for all the good works of earthly rulers even the best show forth but a pale flicker of the brilliance that God would shine upon the world if God were only sovereign over all.

"How the mighty have fallen," David sings at the death of Saul. How the mighty have fallen. And as David sings this lament, the context of his sadness shifts. The first time David uses this phrase it is to describe the loss of Saul and Jonathan as men, Saul his enemy and Jonathan his friend are gone, even their fame and power could not save them.

The second time David uses this phrase he speaks of his affection for Jonathan. Many waters cannot quench love, the writer of the Song of Songs writes, nor death drown it, but those who love, feel death's sting most of all. How the mighty have fallen.

The third time, David speaks this phrase, he speaks of the loss of the nation, the futility of war, the pointlessness of the death that combat brings. Even the mighty succumb to the power of war's sorrows.

How the mighty have fallen, says David, that the weapons of war have brought such suffering. It is as if David mourns for himself and for Israel, as if a moment of hope is lost to the reality of human failure.

On this weekend before the Fourth of July, we are reflective as a nation about all that is good and all that needs attention within our society. We remember the grand hope, the great dream, the wonderful possibility that this nation represents, the experiment of drawing people from around the world to this continent to see if we can live together in peace. The high and noble vision of those who founded this nation articulated the hope and captured the imagination of generations of immigrants that came to this land, so many of them entering through this city, fleeing tyranny, escaping persecution, overcoming poverty, dreaming the dream of freedom.

“We hold these truths to be self evident,” wrote Jefferson and the others that steamy summer in Philadelphia of 1776, “that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

They constituted the government with great egalitarian hopes and humanitarian intentions, “We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect Union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States.”

Over time they amended what imperfections they found, “Congress shall make no law... abridging the freedom of speech or the press, or the right of people to peaceably assemble. ...In all criminal prosecutions, the accused shall enjoy the right to a speedy and public trial ...and to have the assistance of counsel for his defense.”

After a terrible and bloody war, in 1865 they added, “Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude... shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.”

And then in 1920, they affirmed that “The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex.”

It is a marvelous dream this nation. A glorious land, born of hope, founded in liberty, rooted in justice, a light set on a hill for all nations to see.

We know from experience that the light has dimmed sometimes and the dream is deferred. That there is much that is not as it should be. That as a nation we have not always been able to sustain the highest and noblest of goals that we set before us, those aspirations that still inspire us and sometimes are fulfilled, nonetheless.

The majority of the Supreme Court this week finally said out loud what we all have known for far too long, that the prisoners of Guantánamo are detained without representation, as prisoners of war, untried, unaccused, unnamed, tortured and ill treated. The court determined that the proposed trial of them is a violation of federal statutes and international law.

We have seen the travesties and cover-ups of Abu Grahیب and most recently the massacre of innocents in Haditha, the humiliation, mistreatment, and execution of human beings under our care.

It is no better on the other side of this war what with the beheadings, the torture, the kidnappings, but we have set out to live as a nation by a higher standard and what is the world to be if we fail at it?

We have watched as American citizens have been detained, deported, wiretapped, financially tracked, and investigated for little more cause than that they worship in a Mosque in this land where Muslims outnumber Presbyterians and freedom of religious expression is a constitutional right.

Not since the internment camps in which Japanese citizens were dispossessed by the government in World War II, has there been such wholesale stigmatization of people in the name of national security.

These are perilous days in this nation and in the world. No one knows that better than we do in New York. For we were the first to suffer the effects of terror's injury on September 11, 2001.

It is not easy to walk the fine line of protecting the public's safety and guaranteeing the constitutional rights of every person, but in times of fear and danger the temptation to excess is great. Politics may be the art of compromise, but if what is compromised are basic Constitutional freedoms, the price is most certainly too great.

While I was at the General Assembly I heard some Presbyterian military chaplains talking about the young men and women with whom they are serving. They spoke of the terrible circumstances these young people endure; losing friends, dying young, being the target of an enemy whom they cannot see much of the time.

Those soldiers have seen first hand that war is the last thing on earth of which anyone might want to be a part.

But they believe in what they are doing. They want to make the world a better place. They believe that their lives are not sacrificed in vain.

It's they, of all of us, who are most in danger, have most at risk, feel in their soul and spirit the sadness of this time in our nation's history. And they more than any of us who want peace, want to come home, and want to do so when there is no longer a threat to either, peace or home.

The pathos of their situation reminds me of the great high hopes of this land, and the deep chasms that separate us from those hopes.

"How the mighty have fallen," cries David for the loss of Saul and Jonathan, a reminder of the loss of innocence that steals upon us like a fog on this Fourth of July. It's hot dogs and fireworks and cookouts at the beach this weekend. It's sparklers and bottle rockets and spending time with the family. It's remembering a better time in our nation's history, a more innocent time, perhaps, and a time when we rededicate ourselves to living in a world of peace, and welcoming the immigrant, and thinking of those who came here and still do from all over the world, who have passed that lady in the harbor who bids the world to "gather the tired, the poor, the huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the

wretched refuse of other's teeming shores, and bid them welcome with a lamp lifted beside the golden door."³

We have much to do this fourth of July weekend to live more as the people our forebears envisioned we might be. There is much to fix, and much that is still right, thank God. But much to *make* right as well.

Our prayer for the nation this weekend is that we not fall, but that we, as a noble people, rise to our feet, keep our doors open wide, rededicate ourselves to peace, restore respect for all persons regardless of national origin or religious conviction. Work for justice, embrace the right, live as much as possible in the way that God would lead us, and understand that any time we wrap the cross in the flag, we have created a false God, for God never wanted a king for Israel. God only accepted an earthly king as a compromise, for the only true, uncompromising and unfailing sovereign of all nations is God alone, to whom we shall give account of our deeds, individually and corporately. To that end, may God bless America. God bless us every one.

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¹ I Samuel 18:7

² Texts for Preaching. Walter Brueggemann ed., (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993) 403.

³ Paraphrase of the inscription of the Statue of Liberty, based on Emma Lazarus' 'The New Colossus.'"