

Sermon Proper 6B1      June 13, 2021      Fr. Nick Smith

1 Samuel 15:34-16:13    Psalm 20    2 Corinthians 5:6-10 ,14-17    Mark 4:26-34

*In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen*

In our ongoing story of the early Israelites in the land of milk and honey, in their new home of Canaan, we heard last week a narration of their desire for a king. We heard how they wanted to be like other nations, who were apparently led by persons of charisma and fortitude. They wanted, so the story goes, some particular popular person who could lead them in war and in peace, and satisfy their longing to be a credible nation. They now had land, and they had, they believed, God's favor, they had had great spiritual leaders like Moses and Joshua, they had prophets like Samuel to share with them God's voice, but now they really wanted a worldly leader. And you may remember from last week's lesson that God was reluctant to grant their wish, was even a little miffed that they would even ask such a thing. But, after warning them that they should be careful what they wished for, God instructs Samuel to anoint them a human king. This new responsibility falls on a man named Saul.

And Samuel's prophesy that the people might just be disappointed quickly turns to a self-fulfilling prophesy. Saul's leadership is sadly inconstant and confused, and, as we hear today, the Lord was sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel. Now, to be fair, it seems that Saul has been getting mixed messages from both God and the prophet Samuel, and he just couldn't win for trying. But, in any case, his kingship is doomed nearly from the start. God must eventually admit that it is an experiment gone terribly wrong, and that something needs to be done to salvage the situation. So, for the good of the people and their future, God has Samuel go, behind King Saul's back, to Bethlehem, to the home of Jesse, to find the king's new replacement. There, under the secretive pretense of a service of sacrifice, Samuel is to anoint the new leader from among Jesse's sons, and it turns out that the choice is not one of the credible older sons, but surprisingly the youngest, a shepherd boy named David.

Now, we can read these ancient stories as if they were some sort of historical chronicles, or we could even bear with them as if they were fractured fairy-tales, but that would be missing the point, I think. These Old Testament stories were passed on from one generation to another and became revered and retained because they included some theological revelations, some useful truths about what faith is like, about how the relationship between God and human beings is being worked out over time. These stories are examples of the push and pull, the give and take, of divine desire and human need. And they raise a lot of questions for us to ponder even our own generation, questions which help us grow and learn as we live with them. It would be a mistake, I think, to assume that these stories are meant to demonstrate that 'God is in his heaven and all is right with the world.' No, the thread we can follow in these stories has more to do with God's creativity. As the author of Second Corinthians writes, "there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new". The future is certainly uncertain, but it is fresh and new every morning. The kingship of young inexperienced David is just as hopeful as it seems unlikely. But God plants a seed, which mysteriously and marvelously holds the promise of new life and growth.

When our two-year-old grandson Wesley's parents brought him to our home for a visit last month, Grandma Gale, with her signature wisdom, had a surprise up her sleeve. It being the springtime of the year, and the springtime of young Wesley's life, she had acquired some seeds for him to plant in our gardens. Now, daughter Olivia had already done the seed planting thing with Wes, but in their Washington DC condo that had been confined to Dixie cups on the urban window ledge. Planting seeds among the other plants of a garden was a new experience, and what better, more dramatic, choice than pumpkin seeds?! Together, grandmother and grandson dug in the soil, snuggling and watering and praying over those little seeds, and pondering the mystery of new life. And what better choice than a vine, that could, potentially, spread across the lawn, bearing good and useful fruit when faithfully tended?! That task would fall to Grandma, since Wesley's visit was, sadly, an abbreviated one. But with the wonders of modern technology, Wes (or 'Shorty' as his parents often nickname him) has been able to witness daily the sprouting of the new plants and their progress by visual telephone. And, as the days go by, he will be able to virtually cultivate and care for them, while he and grandma pray for their success, and for their protection from rabbit and woodchuck. One day, perhaps, the story of the pumpkin seeds may, like the story of the anointing of David, become retained and revered in Wesley's personal scriptural record, and become a metaphor for the persistence of new life and the wisdom of faithful cultivation. Who knows?!

Jesus tells the parable of the lowly mustard seed which becomes a mighty bush. It is so small and seemingly insignificant that it is as unlikely as young David to ever amount to much. Yet, God makes the mustard seed, God loves it, God keeps it, and, nurtured by caring human hands, it can indeed become significant. Jesus uses the growing mustard plant as a metaphor for the kingdom of God in this passage, an idea which encloses all of our best relationships. That kingdom is not static, though, as if God were on the heavenly throne while all of us gardeners go happily and mindlessly about our work. No, the picture painted in the testaments, both Old and New, is one of God preparing and cultivating the garden with us, sharing the cause and the promise of new life. In the brushstrokes of that painted picture we can see evidence of both divine and human creativity. When the devotion of heaven and earth combine, we call it sacramental. And the sacramentally painted canvas reveals an emerging vision of wholeness, of artistry. Each new brushstroke is an opportunity for a unique new vision, a new addition of beauty, of glory.

And we watch with both curiosity and marvel as the pumpkin vine grows. Who can know what direction it will creep across the lawn? Sure, we can predict that it will have the traits of a typical pumpkin plant, that its blossoms will probably be yellow and will turn to follow the sun as it courses through the summer sky, but the experience of watching this particular plant will be a new one just the same. Will it flourish and produce actual pumpkins? Will those pumpkins provide seeds for next year? Think of the possibilities for generations to come! Will David be a better king than Saul? Will the inspired brushstrokes of one painting inspire new works of art? Will our own stories become full of sacred relationships and be remembered for generations to come? Will the seeds we plant in these days bear useful and beloved fruit for grandchildren yet unborn? God knows! And God cares. Amen