

You Don't Have To
January 22, 2017
I Samuel 24:1-22; Romans 12:14-21
The First U.P. Church of Crafton Heights
Pastor Dave Carver

This week we will return to our year-long exploration of some of the stories surrounding David, the shepherd boy who grew up to be the greatest King that Israel ever had. When we last saw David, he was in a difficult spot: King Saul was breathing down his neck and the residents of the town of Keilah as well as the inhabitants of Ziph had just thrown him under the bus by telling Saul exactly where David and his men could be found. Just as Saul and his army were closing in, however, there was an attack from the Philistines and Saul had to leave David to attend to that matter of national security.



¹Our reading for today begins with a description of a renewed manhunt by Saul and 3000 of Israel's elite fighters. They've come into the wilderness to put an end to David once and for all. The problem is that David and his men have had time to hide in the caves that dot that part of the countryside. During a lull in the search, Saul ducks into the nearest cave to take care of some urgent business. As fate would have it, the cave that he chooses for his toilet is the same cave in which David and his men are hiding out.

While the king squats in what must have been an extremely vulnerable position, David's men goad him to action. "Now's your chance!" they say. "Time to do what you want to this so-called king!"

Emboldened by his men, David creeps up on the

¹ David Spares Saul, Maciejowski Bible, c.1250

unsuspecting Saul and cuts off a corner of his robe. The reason for this is unclear: he may want to toy with Saul a bit, or scare him, or even emasculate him by demonstrating the amount of power he has over the king. But something happens. There is a change of heart. We read that David was “conscience-stricken” and says to himself and his men, “No! I’m not going to do this. I want to – but I won’t! I’m supposed to be better than this...”

David takes it a step further when he calls out to Saul – “My lord, the king”, he says. He tells Saul what he did, and what he wanted to do, and then he says, “But may the Lord be our judge.” In doing so, David casts himself onto the Lord’s care. He refuses to trust either his own judgment or his own sword.

Saul is challenged and humbled by this and takes his army home. At the same time, David chooses not to chase Saul, and he does not proclaim victory – he simply returns to “the stronghold”. I take this both physically and metaphorically. On the one hand, it’s clear that he and his men returned to their hideout – back to the place where they’d be able to defend themselves from further attack. But on the other hand, I think it’s a way of saying that David continued to dwell in the safety of God’s promises to and about him. He did not attempt to hurry God into anything, but rather was content to wait with God until the time was right.

I believe that this part of David’s story contains an important word for Christians in the twenty-first century.

In a general sense, I think that this is a compelling and refreshing reminder that you don’t *have* to do what you *want* to do. I mean, here is Saul spending all his time telling lies about David, attempting to kill David not once but time and time again, and generally making life hell for David. He’s interfered with David’s closest friendship (Jonathan) and David’s marriage (Michal). All that Saul has done in recent years is seek to diminish or disable David. And so when David’s men say, “Now’s

your chance, boss! Do what you want to do!", well, David *wanted* to kill Saul.

But he chose not to do that.

Don't each of us face situations like that all the time? Oh, sure, it may have been a while since your father-in-law stalked you into a cave in the wilderness with 3000 commandos intent on taking your life, but don't you know something about having to decide whether or not you're going to act on your first impulse or wait it out so that you can choose something better?

In many ways, you do this every single day: you decide whether to set an alarm or not; you decide whether to get up when it rings; you decide to jump in the shower, have breakfast, and go to school or work... even when you don't want to do that. You want to stay up late, eat more pizza, watch a couple more episodes on Netflix, and skip work or school. But most days, you choose to do, not what you want to do, but what you ought to do.

Years ago a woman shared with me how messed up her life had become. She had been deeply hurt, and in an effort to anesthetize that pain, she wound up piling bad choice upon bad choice, which led to doing great damage to herself as well as to those who loved her. After we sat for a while, I simply said, "What would happen if you just didn't go out like that every weekend? You know, if you called a friend and stayed home?"

She sat for a moment, and then said, "Wait... are you saying that I don't *have* to do what I *want* to do?"

Of course not. As you contemplate putting that post on social media, making that sarcastic comment, starting that affair, eating that next donut, or choosing to give into the despair that you fear may be swallowing you whole... you can remember that you don't *have* to do any of those things, even if you find that you would really, really *want* to do them in the moment. You have the

power, with God's help, to make other choices.

Now, having said that, I find that I am drawn particularly to the exchange that David and Saul have here. Not only does David choose to do something other than that which he really wants to do, but in so doing he claims a significant victory over someone who has wounded him personally and deeply. There are many people in the room this morning who have struggled with pain as a result of someone else's actions or incompetence. It seems to me that there might be a word of release for us in this conversation between the faithless, yet powerful king and the humble and vulnerable young man who is called to replace him.

When David speaks to Saul, he cries out both to and against the king, and then he declares his freedom from that pain as a defining characteristic of his life. David does not allow Saul's evil to drive himself into a deeper, darker place. Instead, David points out to Saul – in the presence of his men – the fact that Saul has brought great harm into David's life, and then he trusts in God to bring Saul's story to an end. It is not David's role or responsibility to deal ultimately with Saul. David chooses instead to invest himself in hope, trust, and faith.

I thought about this in connection with the recent sentencing of Dylann Roof, the 22-year-old white supremacist who murdered nine African-American worshipers in South Carolina in June 2015. One of the survivors of that attack, Felicia Sanders, addressed Roof after the judge sentenced him to death. In a burst of honesty and vulnerability shaped by her Christian faith, she said, "Yes, I know you. You are in my head. I can't hear balloons pop. I can't see the fireworks. I can't hear an acorn fall out of a tree... Most important, I cannot shut my eyes to pray," she said. "I have to keep my eye on everyone around me."

Did you hear that? This brave woman stared the one who tried to kill her – while she was shielding her 11-year old

granddaughter from the hail of bullets – and named the pain he had caused her. And then she gave him over to God. After her initial comments, she showed those in the courtroom her battered and torn Bible, the same one she carried to that Wednesday night Bible study. The pages had been cleaned of blood, she said, but the words remained intact.

“You can’t help someone who don’t want to help themselves, and that is you,” she said to Roof, adding, “May God have mercy on your soul.”

The Rev. Sharon Risher, whose mother was slain in the attack, stared at Roof and said, “Dylann, I was very vocal about you not getting the death penalty... I still don’t want you to die. I want you be to be able to sit in that cell.”²

Doesn’t that sound like what David said to Saul? “I have not wronged you, but you are hunting me down to take my life. May the Lord judge between you and me. And may the Lord avenge the wrongs you have done to me, but my hand will not touch you. As the old saying goes, ‘From evildoers come evil deeds,’ so my hand will not touch you.”

Again, I realize that there’s no one here who has been falsely accused of treason and hunted down by a mentally unstable monarch; I don’t believe that any of us have been put in a situation where we’ve had to lay between our grandchildren and the bullets of a psychopath. But I know you. You have been hurt. There was a parent or grandparent or

² Quotes from “‘Justice Has Been Served’, Families Say to Dylann Roof” in *USA TODAY*, January 11, 2017.

other trusted adult who abused you in some way. You have suffered greatly at the hands of someone you thought was a friend you could trust. You have been betrayed by a sister or brother or colleague. You have felt the ravages of an attack from an enemy.

What did you do? What will you do?

Let me encourage you first, if you've not done so already, to get out of that situation. Put yourself in a place where the evil cannot reach you – hide yourself in a cave like David if you must, but do anything you can to diminish that person's ability to inflict suffering into your life.

And if you've done that, then seek healing for the wounds which have been received. This is not a selfish act – instead, you have the responsibility to care for yourself so that you do not unwittingly become a perpetrator of pain in the life of another equally innocent person.

And in doing that, I beg you to not allow yourself to be consumed by the thirst for revenge – as tasty as that sounds in the moment. Give your pain – and the one who caused it – to God. No matter how much you want to do otherwise, choose to be better than the one who harmed you.

We do that by following in the way of David. After this confrontation, Saul called his army and headed for home. David did not chase after him. Instead, we are told simply that "David and his men went up to the stronghold." When you have done all you can, then hide out in the stronghold of God's mercy. Invest yourself in the things that bring life and wholeness to other people.

One of the great truths in this life is that we are not prisoners of our own desires. Each and every moment, we are filled with tremendous *want*. When you sing the last hymn and get up to leave this morning, you'll have lots of opportunity to give and receive offense. You do not have to do what you really want to do. You can choose to act differently. Look to God, stay with your community of faith, and hide in the stronghold of grace. Thanks be to God for the gifts that allow us to become better people than we really want to be. Amen.