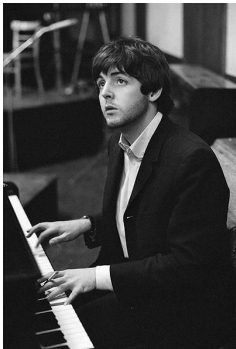


The Long and Winding Road
II Samuel 5: 1-5, Philippians 1:3-6
The First U.P. Church of Crafton Heights
April 23, 2017
Pastor Dave Carver

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One afternoon in 1968, a 25 year-old man paused to take stock of his life. For a decade, he had been climbing to the top of the world. Since he was 15, he and his friends had played in a band that had gained some real success, but now their worlds were crashing in around them. Tensions between the lads were high, and what had once seemed effortless and carefree was now a morass of conflict and miscommunication.



That day, young Paul sat down at his farm in Scotland and plinked out a melody on his piano. He later said, “I was a bit flipped out and tripped out at that time. It’s a sad song because it’s all about the unattainable; the door you never quite reach. This is the road that you never get to the end of.”¹ The result of that afternoon’s labor was a ballad entitled “The Long and Winding Road”, which was released a month after Paul’s band, The Beatles, broke up. It sold 1.2 million copies in the first two days of its release, and was the last #1 hit The Beatles ever had.

My hunch is that you know this tune, but to refresh your memory, here is a portion of the lyrics:

The wild and windy night
That the rain washed away
Has left a pool of tears
Crying for the day

¹ Barry Miles, **Paul McCartney: Many Years From Now** (MacMillan, 1998, p. 539)

Why leave me standing here
Let me know the way

Many times I've been alone
And many times I've cried
Any way you'll never know
The many ways I've tried

Paul recorded a demo version of the song, and was unhappy with it, and left it. Later, John Lennon gave that recording to a producer, who added strings, horns, and a female choir. Paul was so incensed by these changes to his work that when the hearing over the dissolution of The Beatles took place, he listed the treatment of this song as one of his chief grievances. It's a sad, sad song.



²If you didn't know better, you might imagine King David singing this song at some point in his life. The reading we've had for today from II Samuel announces a significant change in David's life. Here, at age 37 or so, he is crowned as the King of all Israel. Prior to this, he'd spent seven and a half years as king of the tribe of Judah in the village of Hebron. That was preceded by two years running a band of 600 guerrillas out of Ziklag. For eight years before that, he'd been hiding out as a fugitive from Saul and the army of Israel. That was preceded by time serving on Saul's staff as a royal musician and part-time Philistine fighter. He had risen to prominence as a teenager when he killed the giant, Goliath, but he first attracted our notice when he was called in from tending the flocks of his father's sheep in Bethlehem and anointed, as a boy, by the prophet Samuel.³

² David, Lorenzo Monaco (c. 1408)

³ This chronology is summarized in *Leap Over a Wall* (Eugene Peterson, Harper-Collins, 1997) p. 137.

If anyone had a right to sing sad songs about long roads that go nowhere and friends who say one thing but do another, it would be David. For virtually his entire life, he was bounced around and searching for some way to live into the call that had been extended to him. More than once, I'm sure it must have been tempting for David to think of life as a twisted, directionless trek that left him alone and powerless against the world.

This is not, however, the song that David chose to sing. Instead of seeing himself as the victim of an unfeeling universe, David opted to see himself as one who had been invited to cooperate with YHWH and to participate in joyful and energetic response to the ways that God had been moving in the world around him.

We have noted several times that David was a mere boy when the prophet Samuel pulled him aside and told him that God would establish him as the king. For the better part of three decades, young David continued to act upon that promise even when he couldn't see how it was coming to fruition. God had appointed him to lead, and so he sought to do that as best he could. Even the staunch traditionalists in Israel offer testimony to the same thing on this, the day of his coronation.

In verse 2 of our reading, these men come to David and say, "In the past, while Saul was king over us, you were the one who led Israel on their military campaigns." This is a tacit affirmation of the fact that even while Saul was wearing the crown, it was David who as *acting* as a King should act. The further Saul descended into his own madness, the more David took it upon himself to do the work of the king – keeping the people safe from their enemies, working for justice, and so on. The people of Israel are able to see in David's actions that which

had only been promised, and now they ask him to step into that role.



⁴In doing so, we see that there is a beautiful symmetry to David's life. Here, at his coronation, the elders remind David that YHWH has called him to be their shepherd. The one who as the eighth-born son of a poor farmer was out tending to the flocks in the field has now become the leader of all of Israel. In choosing this vocabulary, they are reminding David to take advantage of the lessons he's already learned about caring for the weak and vulnerable and to apply them in his office as King.

The other bit of vocabulary that jumps out of this verse is the next term that the elders use to describe David: he is called to be not only the "shepherd" of Israel, but their "ruler." The Hebrew word here is *nagid*. The statesmen could have said, "David, be our *melek*, or "king". But that's the kind of ruler Saul had been. David is charged to be *nagid*, which can mean "ruler" but is often translated as "prince".

Think, for a moment, of the implications of coming into office as the "shepherd" and "prince" of Israel. Although the word is often attached to him, this passage makes it clear that David is not to be "king" in the same way that Saul had been king. A prince is someone who rules in collaboration with a greater authority. YHWH is the King; David is a prince. He has come to realize that true strength will often come through submission, sacrifice, and service – attributes with which Saul appears to have been unfamiliar.

There is no reason to suspect that Paul was thinking about David's willingness to hold on to the promises of God even when outward circumstances seemed to argue against it, but this story

⁴ *Coronation of King David*, Paris Psalter 10th C.

would have made sense to the people who formed the church of Philippi.



⁵Philippi was on a busy highway, the *via Egnatia*, between two important towns. It was officially a “colony” of the Roman Empire, meaning that life here was to reflect as closely as possible the circumstances of those in Rome. This includes, presumably, worship of any number of Roman gods, participation in an economy that is driven by a multitude of slaves, peasants, and service-providers all of whom were there to cater to the whims of the Roman soldiers and former soldiers who ran the place. The church in Philippi had not gotten off to a promising start – there were very few Jews in town, and so the Christian community appears to have been formed by a rag-tag group of marginalized folks. When confronted with the pomp and circumstance of the Roman Empire, I suspect that there were days that the members of First Church, Philippi, looked around and thought, “Am I really able to believe in the call of God to *this place?*”

Paul says in no uncertain terms, YES! “I am confident of this: that the One who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Jesus Christ comes.” Paul encourages the struggling congregation not to give up on that which they’ve received, but instead to hold fast to the promise of God.

He reminds them of the ways that God has been moving in the past, and encourages them to look for God’s hand at work in the present. Furthermore, Paul says that this group of careworn believers can march confidently into an uncertain future knowing of God’s purposes for the Creation.

⁵ *Saint Paul Writing His Epistles* Valentin de Boulogne (c. 1618-20)

It was good enough for David. It was Paul's advice to the folk in Philippi. How's it working out for you? Are you able to live into, or to lean on the promises of God's presence and power in your day-to-day life?

I know you well enough to know that many, if not most, of you have had at least one occasion to throw your hands up in the air and say, "Seriously? Are you for real, God? You expect me to believe that you are moving in and through *this* circumstance? Where are you, God?" How well do you see God's movement in the world around you? How confident are you that God will see the work in YOU through to completion? And how can you get better at those things?

For generations, God's people have made use of a spiritual discipline known as *examen*. Quite simply, this is the practice of setting aside some time – ideally each day – to unplug from the *what do I have to do next and when is it supposed to be done by* rhythm of life and spend some time reflecting about who and how and where you have been in the day and how and where God might have been present in your day or the moments of your day.

Now, here's the deal when it comes to *examen*. The goal is to think objectively enough to see the whole picture, and not to simply obsess about the best or worst five moments of the day. I learned this week about a tool that the National Football League uses that is not available to the ordinary fan. Each game is recorded using a system of cameras called the "All-22". These films allow the coaches to see the entire field of play for the duration of the game. When you and I watch the Steelers play we are forced by the good people at CBS Sports to see how tightly the quarterback grips the laces or how many fingers of the defensive lineman's right hand are jammed into the facemask of the running back. On the other hand, the All-22 is

designed to show the coach how the entire system functions during each play. That way, the coach can see how the guys who *don't* have the ball are behaving away from the play. They have a much broader view of the ebb and flow of the entire contest.

Too often when I stop to think about my day, it's either to beat myself up for that incredibly stupid thing I did right in front of everyone at 11:27 a.m. and how I'm such a moron for doing it OR to think about the fact that I didn't get a speeding ticket when I blew through the speed trap so it was a great day after all.

A better approach would be to try to give some thought to the movement of the entire day and see where things went well and where I struggled. Sometimes I'll ask my wife or a friend to check me on something – I'll say, "This is how I experienced that... what was your sense?" While I don't usually have an "All-22" view of myself, it's helpful to listen to someone I trust and make sure that I'm not being either too hard or too easy on either myself or God.

Of course, another way to make sure that I'm attentive to the presence of God in the world around me is to train my eyes and ears to pick up on that. And for me, one of the best ways to do that is to spend time reading the Bible and being present to God in prayer – because if I can see what it looked like when God was moving in the lives of people like David or Paul, maybe I'll be better equipped to catch a glimpse of him in mine.

It's not unlike bird-watching, to be honest. That is to say, I'm working with my granddaughter so that she knows that just about every red bird she sees at my house is a cardinal. The yellow ones are goldfinches. As she gets older, we'll get a little deeper and talk about the differences between juncos and titmice, and if she really goes crazy, she'll learn about the 35

varieties of sparrow that can be found in North America. The more she looks, the easier it will be for her to discern what she's really seeing.

In the same way, I can train myself, through prayer and scripture, to be better able to spot God in action. When I catch a glimpse – even if it's only momentary – it's easier to remember and live into the promise.

I began this sermon with a love song about looking for company on a road fraught with difficulty, and I'll close it with another. This one wasn't written by a kid from England, but rather one from the Middle East. It's a song about walking in trust with God towards a future that is almost always unknown but is never uncertain, and it describes the fact that security is possible, even in the midst of the storms.



⁶The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing.

He makes me lie down in green pastures,
he leads me beside quiet waters,
he refreshes my soul.

He guides me along the right paths
for his name's sake.

Even though I walk

through the darkest valley,

I will fear no evil,

for you are with me;

your rod and your staff,

they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me

in the presence of my enemies.

You anoint my head with oil;

my cup overflows.

Surely your goodness and love will follow me

all the days of my life,

⁶ Christ as the Good Shepherd, image from the 4th century catacombs

and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

One of the things that allowed David to enter into the role of shepherd and prince of Israel is the fact that he never, ever forgot – not while he was afraid as the rapids of life threatened to inundate him; not while he was forced to spend time in the valley of the shadow of death; not while he was surrounded by his enemies – ne never forgot that he himself had a shepherd and a King. As do I. As do you. Thanks be to God. Amen.