

Utility Failure

July 23, 2017

I Kings 1, II Timothy 4:6-13; 21a

The First U.P. Church of Crafton Heights

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*To hear this sermon as preached in worship, please visit
<https://castyournet.files.wordpress.com/2017/07/sermon07-23-17.mp3>*

I was among the 24,401 who were counted at the major league baseball game between the Pittsburgh Pirates and the Milwaukee Brewers on Wednesday night. After the Pirates tied the game in the bottom of the ninth, the Brewers brought in former Pirate Jared Hughes to pitch the tenth. As Josh Harrison danced off of second base, Hughes stopped several times and bluffed a throw. Twenty thousand umpires screamed that it was a balk, and Hughes should be penalized. As Pirate broadcaster Bob Walk pointed out, “Not a single one of those fans thought that move was a balk when Hughes was wearing a Pirate jersey.”



He’s right, of course. What you see, and hear, and experience – all of it comes through a filter, does it not? Where we sit and what we’ve experienced affects the ways that we hear the stories of scripture and our lives. I was reminded of that this week as I consider the many lenses through which I’ve encountered the story of Abishag the Shunammite, the bulk of which you’ve just heard.

When I was a young man, I heard this part of the story and I thought, “Wait, what? David got old and they looked for who? And told her to do what? Seriously? That happened?” It seemed to me, at that point in my life, that this was a prime example of the old Mel Brooks line, “It’s good to be the king!” When I read these verses, I did so with a good bit of snickering and a little bit of the old “wink-wink nudge-nudge know what I mean?” I was a leerer and an ogler.



¹Then, thanks be to God, I grew and matured. Some might say I got old. For whatever reason, it seemed to me, I came to see the story through Abishag's eyes. Immediately this then became a text of terror. This woman – really, only a teenaged girl – is taken from her home about 50 miles north of Jerusalem and thrust into the King's bedroom. Can you imagine the fear she must have felt, to say nothing of the powerlessness and perhaps even disgust? "What, what? I have to do that? With whom?" When I see the story through her eyes, I am haunted by the words of Frederick Buechner, who writes, "This sad story makes it clear that in peace as in war there's no tragic folly you can't talk a nation's youth into simply by calling it patriotic duty."²

Last summer, when I came up with the plan to preach through the stories of King David, I was pretty sure that I wanted to end the sermons with the one you heard last week. David names Solomon as his successor and the one who would build the temple to YHWH and then rides off into the sunset in a blaze of glorious faithfulness amidst the accolades of his people. Yay!

Oh, I remembered the story of Abishag and David's final days, all right, I just had no intention of touching this particular part of the bible with a ten-cubit pole – not in public worship, thank you very much. I'm not going to go there.

And yet in recent weeks, it kept coming to mind. If we are preaching about the life of David, I thought, why not preach about his death, too? Why not finish the story?

And you can't talk about the death of David without talking about Abishag the Shunammite. So here we are...

¹ *King David and Abishag*, James Tissot (1836-1902)

² *Peculiar Treasures: A Biblical Who's Who* (Harper & Row, 1979, p. 3)

As the reading for today begins, David is an old man, by biblical standards. He is failing in all kinds of ways, and soon, he'll be dead. Evidently, for loads of people, David is a bothersome problem. And what do we do with problems? We manage them, right? We handle them.



A few of you are old enough to remember the old Batman television show. Do you remember when the Caped Crusader and the Boy Wonder were really up against something, they'd reach down to their waists and pluck something from the old "Utility Belt" – it might be a batarang, or a grappling hook, or even a piece of kryptonite... but somehow Batman could always be counted on to find just the right tool to manipulate the situation so that the problem would be solved.



³As David lay dying he is increasingly problematic. The various people who surrounded him would define the problem differently.

For the palace staff, the insiders who were his servants and advisors, these were tough days indeed. Their jobs, income, security, and in some cases, their lives depended on David being a) alive and b) king. So they reach into their utility belts and grab whatever tools they can: bring on the blankets. When they don't work, then find another tool to apply to the situation. Abishag? Sure, why not? Throw her in there and see what she can do...

Not only are neither of these approaches successful, what we really are forced to witness here is a dehumanization of both Abishag and David. They're not really people any more – they are simply tools utilized in the hopes that a problem can be solved.

³ *Bathsheba Makes an Appeal to David* (detail), Arent de Gelder 1645 – 1727

For his son Adonijah, David's death is a different problem. Adonijah wants to be king so badly that he can taste it, and he's not going to let a little thing such as knowing that his dad had already declared Solomon as, the next ruler affect his chances. Adonijah was nothing if not determined, and so he just pretended that his father was already dead. He threw a party and declared himself to be king.

Meanwhile, back in the palace, the Prophet Nathan and David's wife Bathsheba are hatching a plan to ensure that Solomon, not Adonijah, will be the next ruler. These folks have bet everything on Solomon, and now it looks as if their plan is in danger of failing. So what do they do? They cook up a plot wherein they "bump into each other" in David's presence, and casually remind him that he better keep his promises (and fulfill his obligations) before he dies.

I want to stop here for a moment and consider where these people are at this point in the story.

Adonijah is just south of town in the community of Siloam, where he's gathered most of his remaining brothers, members of the clergy, and key officials in the army. He's mapping out a parade route and planning his inauguration...

Nathan, the prophet who has walked with David through thick and thin in the previous decades, and Bathsheba, his wife and the mother of Solomon are both holed up in a coffee shop somewhere scheming as to how to get the old geezer to carry through on his promises...

And David – well, to quote Monty Python, "He's not dead yet..." But in some lonely corner of the royal residence, the one who is called "the man after God's own heart", or "the lamp of all Israel", or "the glory of the nation" is dying, and he's all alone...



But wait – no! He’s not alone. Abishag is there.

Why? Didn’t she fail? She had one job, and it didn’t get done! Why is she still hanging around?

In I Kings 1:15 we read that when Bathsheba and Nathan got around to meeting up in the King’s bedroom, Abishag is there “attending” to David.

Who is Abishag that she should be the one doing this? Where are his children? Where is his wife? What about his friends?

The reality is, so far as we can see, that at this point each of these people is focused on themselves and trying to secure some benefit to themselves out of David’s living or dying. And because of that, at the hour of his death, the only person who is present to the greatest king that Israel ever knew is a teenaged girl who is probably scared out of her mind.

She’s not fixing any problems. She’s not solving any crises. She is just watching and waiting with an old man as the hour of his death draws near. There is no indication that there is anything in either his living or dying for her. She is simply, generously, kindly there for David.

And if this was the way that King David died, it would be sad for that reason alone. The real tragedy, though, is that this happens again and again and again.

So much of the time, death is so darned inconvenient. I needed you to do _____ for me, and you were dead. If she dies, how will I ever _____? Who will make sure that _____ happens now?

Too often we view ourselves and each other through a utilitarian lens. You exist only in relationship to what you can or cannot do to help me. For Adonijah, Bathsheba, Joab, Shimei, Nathan, and the rest of the gang, David had ceased to be of any value. He was no longer in a position, frankly, to *do* anything for them. With his usefulness gone, it would be easier for all of them if he just died already. David was at this point in his life a utility failure. He was, at best, an inconvenience.

As we have done in recent weeks, let's take a moment and compare the life of David with that of Paul. Our reading from Timothy finds him similarly nearing the end of his life. The things that defined him – vigorous travel, eloquent speeches to crowds in places like Athens, Jerusalem, or Antioch – they are all in the past. Now Paul is an old man, cold and lonely.

In this intimate letter to his dear friend, he claims that he wants his books and a favorite sweater, but the aging apostle is being more than a little disingenuous here. What he really wants is his friends. Some of those who were with him have run away; others are busily engaged. He's got his old friend, Dr. Luke with him. And he says to Timothy, "Please, get Mark. And you. Come. Come before winter."

Paul doesn't want to die alone. I don't think anyone wants to die alone.

I don't know about any of you, but I sure have learned a lot about David in the past nine months. More importantly, because of David, I believe that I have some deeper insight into my own life. And now, I find that as we conclude this series of sermons about David, I wonder what there is for me to learn about the ending of my own story, or the stories of the people that we love.

I understand that for many, if not most, of the people in our lives, the relationship is somewhat utility-based. We hear of a death and we say, “Oh, he was my barber...that was my neighbor...She was the one who taught the dance classes to my children...” One of the implications is that we’ll have to find another barber, meet some new neighbors, and engage a replacement dance teacher. There’s nothing wrong with that. We are, in some ways, inextricably linked to the kinds of things that we do. When we die, there are some people that will miss the things that we *do* more than they will miss *us*.

But some folks are more than that in our lives – much, much more. Some people are measured for who they are, not for what they do.

This morning, I’d like to ask you to close your eyes – just for a few seconds, mind you. I’m not talking about a nap, I just want you to think about some of the people in your life whom you simply *like* or even *love*. People that you want to be with because being *with them* is good in and of itself, and not for any tangible benefit you might receive. Just close your eyes and think for a few moments.

Do you have in mind some people that you enjoy simply being with? People that you value because they are themselves, and not because they give you rides when you need them or do such a great job with the laundry...

Here’s some good news: a lot of the people that you’re thinking about are not dead. Most of them are not, so far as we know, close to death. So take time to celebrate those people today, and in the days to come. Enjoy them, and let them know that you do!

Sooner or later, however, one of those people – or you yourself – will be dying. This is the time to get ready for that.

Twelve years ago today I stood in this spot and preached a funeral for a young victim of Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (aka Lou Gehrig's Disease). This young woman and I spent a lot of time together in the months prior to her death, and I shall always be grateful for the lessons that she taught me about living and dying.

One of the most horrid aspects of ALS is the constant diminishment and erosion of one's body. Sooner or later, you – and you are still very much your *you* – can't do a blessed thing. The patient lies in an unresponsive body waiting for someone to come and blow her nose or comb his hair. And wonders, "What is the point? I mean, who am I if I am not *useful* to anyone for anything?"

And on the day that my young friend died, I spent hours trying to remind her of that which I tried to tell many of you on the day that you were born: you are a child of God. You are fearfully and wonderfully made. You are *not* what you do, what you save, what you give, who you sleep with, or the places you go. Simply by virtue of being made in the image of God, you are worthy of love and friendship.

When those we love develop an awareness of the fact that they may be dying, may we have the grace to do what Paul asked Timothy to do, and to give to others what Abishag gave to David: may we have the grace to simply be with this person who matters.

And when we develop an awareness of our own impending mortality, may we be blessed with those who remember us – and who help us to remember ourselves.

And finally, as the church of Jesus Christ, the body of Christ present on earth, may we take it as our sacred honor and ministry to bring this reminder to those whom no one loves.

More than 450 years ago, as much of Europe was rising from the ashes of the Black Death, the plague, incessant war, and famine, a group of believers met together in the town of Heidelberg to write a statement of faith that would help their children embrace the truths they held. The Heidelberg Catechism begins with the simple question, “What is your only comfort in life and in death?”, and the reply is beautiful: “That I am not my own, but belong— body and soul, in life and in death— to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ...Because I belong to him, Christ, by his Holy Spirit, assures me of eternal life and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.”

As we conclude our exploration of the life of David, may we see here in his death, with the help of Abishag the Shunammite, the truth that this beautiful and reckless man of God embraced day after day after day: that we, too, belong to God body and soul, in life and death, because of the work that he, and not we, have done. Thanks be to God! Amen.