

When the Fog Clears

November 6, 2016

I Samuel 22:6-23; Colossians 1:15-20

The First U.P. Church of Crafton Heights

Pastor Dave Carver



On December 31, 1988, Buddy Ryan's Philadelphia Eagles traveled to Soldier Field in Chicago to take on Mike Ditka's Bears in a divisional playoff game. The first half was sunny and clear, but then the fog rolled in from Lake Michigan and visibility was reduced to a matter of feet. Bears linebacker Mike Singletary said, "When I think about the last plague when Moses told the people the Death Angel was going to come in, it was like that." Terry Bradshaw, who was in the booth for CBS that day, said it was the most frustrating game of which he had ever been a part. The crowd could not see the game and in fact the players could not even see across the field. Referee Jim Tunney ended up announcing the down and distance for each play on his wireless microphone.



Some of the Eagles argued that the game should have been suspended because of the difficulty seeing the ball, but the NFL had no rules about fog-related play, and the so-called "Fog Bowl" was played to completion even though most of the people

participating in it were severely limited in their ability to play the game.

You know what that's like. That's what fog does to us, isn't it? Whether it's on the playing field or on the highway, fog brings uncertainty and unpredictability. In fact, we use that word as a metaphor to describe what it's like when a person is not in a position to think clearly or fully appreciate their the current reality. When we're not sure exactly what someone means, we say things like "well, her judgment is clouded" or "ever since his wife died he's been in a real fog."



¹This is clearly the case in ancient Israel. For several months now, we've been walking through the stories that relate to David, the shepherd boy who slew Goliath and grew up to become the greatest king that Israel ever knew. We've walked with David through both triumphant and difficult situations, and you've just heard the horrific account of the day that King Saul slaughtered 85 priests in the town of Nob because one of them had helped David and his men. In fact, Saul was so irate that after he finished with the priests,

¹ *Saul Commands Doeg to Slay the Priests*, James Tissot (1836-1902).

he ordered the extermination of every inhabitant of the entire town – men, women, and children – as well as all of the animals. Saul, and all of Israel, really, was lost in a fog that day. He could not see what mattered; he did not appreciate what was true... It was simply horrible.

How did we get to this place?

Well, years previously, the people of Israel had no king. They asked God to give them a King, and God said, "I'd prefer not to." They asked the prophet Samuel to give them a king, and Samuel said, "That's really not such a good idea. You don't want a king."

But Israel replied, "The heck we don't! Give us a king!"

And Saul was chosen as the king, primarily because he's the tall, good-looking kid that everyone knows has some really great future...

And, to be honest, it's not all bad at first, but by and by Saul begins to believe his own press releases. He falls in love with the trappings of that office and the seemingly limitless power that kings have. Saul and Samuel are increasingly irritated with each other.

Everything comes to a head the day that the Lord sent Saul out to fight the Amalekites. These were people who had opposed the Israelites as they left Egypt and had generally made life miserable for God's people, so God commanded Saul to take his army and cleanse the land of anything Amalekite-related. Saul sets out to do that, but when he gets rid of most of the enemy soldiers, he discovers that they've got some really, really nice stuff... and it seemed like such a



waste to get rid of *all* of it... and Saul felt really big and strong when he was parading the Amalekite king around... Saul became lost in the fog of his own power and acquisitiveness that day.

²The day that Saul slaughtered the Amalekites was an equally horrible day to the one that you just heard about in terms of the dead bodies strewn across the landscape, but the reality is that Saul defied an order from God so that he might satisfy his own greed and pride and on that day, he was told, "You're finished, Saul. Someone else will take your place as king. It won't be today, and it won't be tomorrow, but your days are numbered."

² *Saul Spares Agag and the Fattest Animals*, detail from the *Maciejowski Bible* (1266)

And for years, Saul continues acting as Israel's king. He lives in the palace, he signs all the paychecks... but every day, he's looking, wondering, who will it be?

Meanwhile, David is secretly anointed as king and in an odd twist, is called by Saul to be a servant in the royal household.

Saul knows that something is coming, but not when, not who, not where... It is a recipe for madness, for paranoia, for distrust. Eventually, he sees the success that David is having and assumes that David is out to get him, and so he acts preemptively by seeking to kill David.



³He gets so wrapped up in his hatred for David that, as we have heard, he issues a direct order to murder the priest that helped David. And to murder all the other priests.

And to murder every man, woman, and child in that village. And to kill all the animals and destroy the entire community.

The person who was unwilling to carry out a death sentence on the enemies of God now, in a fit of rage, exterminates the people who are actually serving God.

³ *Saul Orders Ahimelech Beheaded While Abiathar Flees to David*, Utrecht History Bible (1430)

It is horrible.

So much death.

Everyone... everyone except... except Abiathar. A young man from the priestly family somehow escapes and runs to David for protection. On one level, it's an account of how one frightened young man saves another in a time of horror and conflict.

However, on a deeper level, this becomes the narrative for a fundamental shift in the fabric of the nation of Israel. Never again would the priests help Saul to "inquire of the Lord". Saul is completely and utterly on his own from here on out, as the power of the priesthood and the priestly endorsement passes to young David... or, to be even more accurate, the priests, in the person of Abiathar, have finally caught up to what God has been doing for years.

And you may be saying to yourself, "But self, why does any of this matter to me? These are stories from halfway around the world that describe events that took place three millennia ago!"

These are horrible stories. And they are especially

horrible on Preschool Sunday. Come on, Carver, were you even thinking? These people aren't here to listen to the slaughter of the inhabitants of Nob; they hoped to see their children have a good time with their school friends at church. What can we possibly learn from this?

We learn that God does not leave his promises vacant. In our narrative for today, if Saul had somehow managed to destroy the priesthood or silence God, then faith would be dead. Yet what we have is a description of the way that a remnant is preserved. Abiathar survives to serve the Lord even on this unholyest of days.

We learn that God does not need Saul in order to do God's business. In the days to come, we'll be reminded that God doesn't need David, either.

We learn that God chooses to use those who are seeking the best and who are willing to make themselves available to God.

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Now, maybe I'm the only one in the room who feels this way, but it sure seems to me that our culture is shrouded in a fog right now. We can't see clearly enough that every life has meaning and purpose in God's

eyes; we can't accept our own responsibility for systemic racism or a news cycle that drips with violence or environmental disaster that is at odds with the Creator's intent. And then there's the election...

To put it simply, we have a theological problem. Too many of us are saying, "If so and so does not win (or, equally stridently, 'if this other person *does* win'), then that's it. The world will collapse."

No, it won't.

Now don't get me wrong – I have some pretty strong ideas about who I'd like to see on the "ins" and who I'd prefer to be on the "outs". I have some deep fears about what might happen if the candidate I prefer should lose on Tuesday.

But that's just me, walking through the fog, talking two days before a close election. The truth that resounds through the ages is plain and simple: God does not need Trump or Clinton or Stein or Johnson in order to be God.

God is God today, and God will be God a week from today.

On Wednesday, in all probability, we'll wake up and discover that someone has been elected to serve as the 45th President of these United States. And, in all probability, there will be fear. There may be lawsuits. There will be planning and plotting and anger and sadness. There will be winners and losers.

And in the midst of all that, at 7:15 on Wednesday morning Treva will come and open the Clairhaven Street doors (unless someone leaves them unlocked on Tuesday night – we've really got to step up our "locking the door" game, people) and we'll get ready for another day here. Mrs. Mack and the rest of the Preschool team will arrive and set up the classrooms. Families will come and drop off their children – you should see that street between 9:20 and 9:40 – a sea of vehicles, each bearing an assortment of car seats and bumper stickers and dings and dents... Children will come in and learn about squirrels and turkeys, and their teachers will talk with them about what it means to be thankful.

Jason, Brad, and another group of folks will make sure that the after school program is ready to roll. Students will come in and do their homework, be challenged and

stimulated by experiments and activities, and engaged by supportive relationships as we do our best to equip them to be and do their best.

The Deacons will continue to plan and prepare for a new food ministry that will take shape next month. An amazing team of young adults will take the next steps in laying the groundwork for their life-changing trip to Malawi, Africa. The work of the church will continue in every single way come Wednesday morning.

And outside the church? You'll go over to Shop N Save to get milk, we'll say hello to friends who are in hospitals, and a few of you will decide it's finally time to put up the storm windows at home.

In short, we will continue to live as though God, not any human being, is in control. The election will have occurred, and it will have consequences, but the fabric of reality will remain unchanged.



Our task, come Wednesday, will be difficult. No matter which side prevails in the election, the people of God will continue to have before us the work of reconciliation. Did you hear what

Maddy read about Jesus earlier? “He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” That was true when Abiathar was hightailing it out of Nob; it was true when the fine citizens of Colossae were doing their level best to ride Paul out of town on a rail, and it’s true today. And it’ll be true on Wednesday.

And if we assume that it has been and is and will be true, then we move on to the next phrases, which lay out the work of the Christ – the work that Jesus began when he was on earth and which the church has continued as we are now the expression of his body in this place and at this time: “For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven...”

I’m telling you right now that it is not just a good idea, it is God’s command for you to be working on this ministry of reconciliation with your neighbors – even the ones who support the candidate you can’t abide, or who give voice to opinions you find detestable, or who hold values different than you do. You who wear the name of Christ are not free to dismiss anyone; you do not have the option of name-calling or bullying. Instead, we are called to live out Christ’s intention of justice and peace for all and in all and over all and through all.

Some of you have some nerve-wracking and anxiety-filled days ahead of you. But I'm here to tell you that the fog will clear, and the sun will rise.

In fact, he already has. Thanks be to God, the Son has already risen, and that is the only thing that can drive away the fog. Amen.