

Which Story Will You Choose?

November 13, 2016

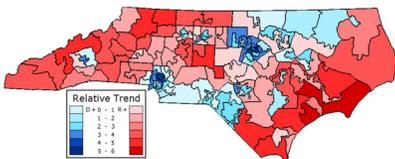
I Samuel 23:1-12; II Corinthians 9:6-11

The First U.P. Church of Crafton Heights

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In case you missed it, there was an election in the United States earlier this week. It was in all of the papers and some of the television networks even mentioned it.

I don't know if you were glued to the returns or lost on Netflix on Tuesday evening, but I was fascinated by one thing. There were rows of desks full of people who were talking about what was happening, and then someone like George Stephanopoulos or Lester Holt would turn to a colleague and say, "Tell us about



what's happening in Watauga County, North Carolina, Bill...", or "Let's take a quick look at Macomb County, Michigan." And the analyst would throw a map of this obscure (to me, at

any rate) county on the board and we'd be bombarded with information about how many left-handed, college-educated, men in that area played lawn tennis and changed their own oil. Well, maybe not exactly, but we'd hear demographics about these counties and we were told that these were "bellwether communities". That is, these regions were supposed to be able to help the entire nation contextualize a larger question, or help us see how this particular group of "real Americans" address one of the issues of our day. The whole map seemed too daunting, but a glimpse into one of these towns helped us to process what was or wasn't happening.



This morning, we'll leave the election behind but I will invite you to visit another bellwether community. Let's take a look at the citadel of Keilah, a small fortress in the lowlands of Judah.

This community was on the fringes of the nation of Israel, at the base of the mountains that led upward to Jerusalem.

David and his men – about six hundred of them – are pretty well-occupied with fleeing King Saul. The murderous and troubled monarch has just finished wiping out all the priests (and indeed the entire town) in Nob, and he is hot for David's blood. David and his army, along with the one surviving priest, Abiathar, are holed up in the wilderness. All of a sudden, they get a distress call. Listen for the Word of the Lord in I Samuel:

When David was told, "Look, the Philistines are fighting against Keilah and are looting the threshing floors"

This is bad news. These are Israelites – children of God – who are being attacked by the Philistines, or "sea people". This is a particularly vicious attack because they are targeting the threshing floors. That means the Philistines are not only bringing violence to the city, they are stealing the food that the community will need from now until the next harvest. This is already a problem, and if help doesn't come soon, it'll be a disaster.

David's response is interesting. Remember, he has a priest with him now, and so he makes use of that resource:

... he inquired of the Lord, saying, "Shall I go and attack these Philistines?"

The Lord answered him, "Go, attack the Philistines and save Keilah."

In previous stories about David, we've heard of his faith in God and his trust in God to protect him; now we overhear this conversation which reveals David to be a man who is totally at ease with God and reliant on God for direction. And it's pretty plain to David – God says, "go!"

But David's men are not so sure:

But David's men said to him, "Here in Judah we are afraid. How much more, then, if we go to Keilah against the Philistine forces!"

They're incredulous. "You've gotta be kidding us, Boss! Saul's already trying to kill us – and now you want to antagonize the Philistines, too?"

David returns to the Lord and is reassured:

Once again David inquired of the Lord, and the Lord answered him, "Go down to Keilah, for I am going to give the Philistines into your hand." So David and his men went to Keilah, fought the Philistines and carried off their livestock. He inflicted heavy losses on the

Philistines and saved the people of Keilah. (Now Abiathar son of Ahimelek had brought the ephod down with him when he fled to David at Keilah.)

This is good news on several fronts, isn't it? David, even while he is running for his life from an irrational King Saul, does what real kings ought to do. He seeks the Lord; he puts himself on the line in service of those who are weak or vulnerable; and he defeats the enemy.

But that's not to say that everything is honky-dory. Even though the Philistines are, at least for the moment, taken care of, Saul is still breathing murderous threats against David.

Saul was told that David had gone to Keilah, and he said, "God has delivered him into my hands, for David has imprisoned himself by entering a town with gates and bars." And Saul called up all his forces for battle, to go down to Keilah to besiege David and his men.

David and his men had been on the run *in the wide-open desert*. When they responded to the cry of the Keilahites, that placed them in a much more vulnerable, contained position. They are essentially sitting ducks in a small town that is surrounded by walls and gates. Once more, David turns to the

Lord:

When David learned that Saul was plotting against him, he said to Abiathar the priest, "Bring the ephod." David said, "Lord, God of Israel, your servant has heard definitely that Saul plans to come to Keilah and destroy the town on account of me. Will the citizens of Keilah surrender me to him? Will Saul come down, as your servant has heard? Lord, God of Israel, tell your servant."

And the Lord said, "He will."

Yes, this is not necessarily good news for our hero. However, it gets worse in a hurry:

Again David asked, "Will the citizens of Keilah surrender me and my men to Saul?"

And the Lord said, "They will."

Even though David and his men had just come and saved their bacon (although I suppose that being Jewish, there wasn't much actual bacon to be found), the Lord tells David that the inhabitants of Keilah will hand him over to Saul in a heartbeat.

Doesn't that just take the frosting right off your flakes? Let that sink in a bit... David is minding his own business, trying

to protect himself and his men in the desert. The town council sends out the Bat-signal and, at great risk to themselves, David and the boys show up in the nick of time and rescue the children, save the women, and preserve the harvest. The town is saved – yay!

And how does Keilah repay David? By throwing him under the bus...or the chariot...or the camel...or whatever. They're preparing to turn him over to King Saul.

Fortunately, David is warned of this plan by God, and he gets out of town as quickly as he can and goes to hide in the wilderness near the town of Ziph. He's not even unpacked there when the Council of that town sends a message to Saul that David and his men are there, ripe for the picking.

Seriously? Who does that? Obviously, people who are afraid. Saul, so far as anyone knows, is still the King. Saul runs the army. He's the Commander in Chief. Saul could really hurt us – we don't want to mess with Saul. I mean, don't get me wrong – we really appreciate what David and the fellas did for us, but... let's be real. We've got to think practically here.

The inhabitants of Keilah and Ziph probably feel at least some level of discomfort about what they're doing to David,

but the reality is that their fear of Saul was stronger than their gratitude to David. They had the opportunity here to choose their own story and to write themselves in their own narrative. What if they had said, "Yo, Saul... don't bother. David is our guy. David saved us"?

We'll never know, of course, because in this instance fear won the day. Fear and insecurity are powerful forces in our world.

So let me ask you: Is Keilah a bellwether? Is that little community an accurate predictor of what is or should be? Do you think that fear is stronger than gratitude?

And don't tell me you don't know anything about this kind of fear. This has been a long week for everyone in the USA. Some of us were paralyzed prior to Tuesday night, and others afterwards. Change is on the horizon, and it appears to be a significant change. You can feel the anxiety in the air in lots of places. Tension is everywhere. Families are arguing, friendships are being challenged, allegiances are being tested, and everywhere we go, uncertainty seems to raise its head.

And in the midst of that, you got a letter from the church saying that it's time for us to think about our giving for 2017.

How in the world are we supposed to think clearly about that right now? The markets are all volatile and economies are unsteady. Is *now* the time we want to talk about money in the church?

Well, now *is* the time I'd like to talk with you about what kind of people you would like to be; or, to put it another way: now *is* the time for you to decide who you're going to be – which story you will choose to write as you enter the next chapter of your life.

Keilah and Ziph had a choice: will we live into our fears, or will we respond to the anxiety in our lives with gratitude and hope?

As we turn the page toward Advent and Christmas and even 2017, which story will you choose? Will we allow fear and uncertainty to reign in us, or will we act like people who trust in the Lord of all creation, the maker of all that is, seen and unseen?

Things were pretty rocky when Paul wrote to his friends in Corinth and challenged them to be people of generosity in a time of famine. When the region around them was faced with uncertainty and lack of resources, he reminded them that

kindness and encouragement and generosity are the things for which we are created. He invited them to live into a narrative that brought out those things in their character.

What's going to happen?

I don't know what happened to Keilah – the Bible doesn't really say anything else about after David saved it and they thanked him by throwing him out. But David turned out all right, didn't he?

I know that the Corinthians heeded Paul's advice and the church of Jesus Christ went from being a loose affiliation of a couple of dozen scattered faith communities to being the visible expression of Christ around the world.

What's going to happen in our homes? In our neighborhood and world in the year to come?

I don't know the answer to any of that. I sure can't control most of it.

But this is what I do know: on Tuesday evening I'll be getting on a plane and flying to South America, where I'll be preaching at the wedding of a young woman who was here for a year and changed for a lifetime because people in this

community invested in her. While I'm in South America, I'll be taking my granddaughter to visit a community of indigenous people in Chile so that she can learn something about appreciating a culture that is really different than the one in which she's being raised.

On Christmas, I'll be taking a group of amazing and courageous young adults to one of the hardest, most difficult places on the planet because they want to go there. They have sensed God's call on their lives to grow in service and hope and love.

And sometime in between these trips, Sharon and I will fill out our "estimate of giving" card. I'm telling you now that in this time of uncertainty and fear, I'll be doing my level best to write a larger number in there than I did last year.

In the year to come, I hope to learn how to be more generous with my time and resources and love. I want to give blood. To love my neighbors. To look for birds. To pray for my country. To work to protect the environment. To treasure life – all life.

In short, in 2017 I want to choose to be closer to God's purposes of generosity and gratitude than I am now, and I'm

going to use this little card as a tool to help me get there. I'm going to choose to enter into the story that has main characters named "Gratitude" and "Generosity", and I will try to reject the ones named "Fear" and "Selfishness."

I trust that I will not be alone. Thanks be to God, we are never alone. Amen.