David: The Good, The Bad, & The Ugly

Erica Lea-Simka

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One of my favorite movies is *Miss Congeniality*. You know the one - Sandra Bullock plays a surly, uncultured FBI agent who has to transform into a convincing Miss America Pageant contestant for an undercover operation. Throughout the movie there are jabs at the world of pageants and pretty privilege. When it comes to the interview portion of the pageant, William Shatner’s character interviews each of the contestants asking, “What is the one most important thing our society needs?”

Ms. Hawaii “world peace” [polite applause]  
Ms. Texas “world peace” [polite applause] Ms. California “world peace” [polite applause]  
Ms. New Jersey [Sandra Bullock’s character] “that would be harsher punishment for parole violators, Stan. [cricket, cricket awkward pause...] and... world peace! [cheering and applause]²

If the Israelites had been asked this question, “What is the one most important thing our society needs?”, they would have said, “a king!”. There is a long narrative of the people begging God for a king, and eventually the text says God gives them Saul as their king. Saul was not the most upright of kings, though to be fair, spoiler alert: neither will David be.

Where we pick up today, God sends Samuel, the prophet, to anoint, that is be God’s representative in selecting a new king. Let’s pause here for a minute. When it comes to selecting leaders, especially national leaders, be skeptical of anyone who says with confidence, “this is the leader God has chosen for us”.

Taking this logic to some reasonable conclusions, I am unable to believe that it was *God* who chose Andrew Jackson to be President, especially with the horrific massacre of Indigenous peoples that happened under his leadership. I am unable to believe that it was *God* who chose Franklin Roosevelt to be President, especially with his executive order that incarcerated more than 120,000 Japanese-Americans in American concentration camps. I am unable to believe that it was *God* who chose Barack Obama to be President, especially with the ethically questionable use drone warfare. Just a few of 235 years’ worth of examples.

In our anxiety to cope with collectively made, democratic decisions, we, like many of our ancestors in the Bible, attribute our decisions and circumstances to God’s hand. We are not in the ancient world or a theocracy. We do not look to God to select our national, civic, leaders. Rather, we ask God for wisdom as we select our leaders through democracy. We ask God for strength to hold our leaders to account rather than expecting God to strike them down. For better or for worse – it’s us.

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¹ Erica Lea-Simka serves as pastor of Albuquerque Mennonite Church, Albuquerque, NM. This sermon was delivered over the course of two Sundays, June 16 and June 23, 2024

Back to our passage, Samuel arrives at Jesse’s house, as God instructed him. Each of the sons is paraded in front of Samuel like a beauty pageant of burly men looking to score the power and prestige of becoming king. It is the unlikely candidate who wins or is the chosen one: David. Or is David actually the likely one?

1 Samuel 16: 12 describes David as handsome with beautiful eyes, even though just a few verses earlier, 1 Samuel 16:7 says God is not interested in outward appearance. When Saul is selected as king earlier in chapter 9, his father is described as having a handsome son. Now, with Samuel talking to Jesse, Jesse’s handsome son, David is chosen as the next king.

Scholar Daniel Smith-Christopher writes, “It is hard to avoid a sense of déjà vu. Thus the text rather subtly may be suggesting, are we making another mistake here?... ‘In with the new’ invariably also meant ‘out with the old’. The new is typically the easier part; rejecting the old is hard. What seemed to work so well in the past is hard to give up, even when clear mistakes were made.”3

A lot of life is recognizing patterns in ourselves and the systems we are involved in. God invites us to deep thoughtfulness and sensitivity in all areas of life, including selecting our leaders. Listen to this description of mature, honorable, leadership and authority from a book I love, Called to Community: The Life Jesus Wants for His People4:

True authority is exercised in the context of justice for all, with special attention to the weakest people, who cannot defend themselves and are part of the oppressed minority. This is an authority ready to give its life, which does not accept any compromise with evil, deceit, and the forces of oppression... many people confuse authority and the power of efficiency, as if the first role of people with responsibility is to make decisions, command effectively, and so exercise power. But their role is first of all to be people to whom others can turn for help and advice, to provide security, to affirm, to support, to encourage, and to guide.

I don’t know of anyone on the 2024 ballot that meets this criteria. We have 3 possible responses to this lack of ideal candidates:

1) Disengagement: I’m not get my hands dirty in that mess!
2) Self-interest: This is what’s best specifically for me!
3) Harm reduction: A decision has to be made, so how can we make decisions as a society that reduce the amount of possible or probable harm? Intention and results both matter.

When Samuel is on his way, searching for the next King, he is asked in verse 4, “do you come peaceably?” The JPS translation renders this, “do you come on a peaceful errand?” This is a question I want us to sit with today and in the months ahead as we prepare nationally, and more locally, to move candidates into offices of important authority. Do I come to this task, this process, this vote, this campaigning, this rhetoric, peaceably? I can’t change or control anything outside of myself, and sometimes not even things within myself, but I can notice

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4 Green, Connections, p.209.
and adjust where I am come and do not come, how I approach and don't approach the task at hand peaceably.

This is not peace in the silly Miss America pageant “world peace” sense. Peace in the wholeness and well-being of ourselves, of people, of the Earth, near and far, shalom sense. May the God of peace, Hashem Shalom, be our guide.

To be continued next Sunday.

I will never forget one day that I thought I might die. I was in seminary on the campus of Baylor University. The seminary has its own building and is its own entity under Baylor. Being the nerd and overachiever I am, I was also auditing a class with the Baylor School of Religion called “Women in the Church” which required travelling to the other side of the good-sized campus to another building.

One warm spring day I was power walking over there, probably late, when I hear the familiar sound of scraping and plunking, of someone on a skateboard coming through campus. Out of the corner of my eye I see in the distance the unmistakable Brittany Griner coming right toward me on her skateboard.

For those of you who don’t know, Brittany Griner is one of the greatest women’s basketball players – college and WNBA – ever. She was on the Lady Bears basketball team the same time I was in seminary. She is 6’9” and wears size 17 shoe. The only person I have seen in person that was bigger was the late Margo Dydek who played, at that time, for the San Antonio Silver Stars. She was 7’2”. But I only saw her at a distance at a game. Brittany Griner, however, I saw multiple times much closer in person, including this terrifying day walking across campus.

Her locs blown back by the wind as she came fast downhill, my fight or flight instincts kicked in and all I could do was freeze, and pray that she had the skill to weave around me and a few other folks on the sidewalk. Thank God she did. There was a helplessness I felt as I anticipated the possibility of being leveled by a physically powerful person propelled by the laws of physics. Like a hurricane coming, all I could do was hunker down and draw inward.

Looking at our passage today, this showdown between David and Goliath, we have heard read one of the most well-known stories in the Bible. So ubiquitous, the largest frog in the world is named the Goliath Frog and the largest spider in the world is named the Goliath Tarantula.

We know about Goliath, or we think we do. Goliath: huge, impossible, insurmountable. Goliath is said to have been six cubits and a span, which is over nine feet tall. Scholar Daniel Smith-Christopher writes, “Goliath was the [Philistine’s] super weapon, the image of human military prowess.” The largest and loudest representation of military might humbled not by David, but by God working through David. It is a more peculiar story than a simple first glance suggests. Later in this epic saga of David, in 2 Samuel 21, Goliath is said to be killed by Elhanan, not David. 1 Samuel 27-29 David collaborates with the Philistines. What is going on here?

Again, scholar Daniel Smith-Christopher calls the story of David and Goliath propaganda meant to solidify David’s role as being on this side of the battle, of being loyal to

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5 Green, Connections, p.93.
the Israelites. Of course he’s the king. The story of David slaying Goliath may well have been added later in order to simmer down wonderings about David’s loyalties after he crossed the sharp line in the sand that divided the Philistines and the Israelites. To be one of us, to be clearly on God’s side, the legend of David required defeating the enemy before he could collaborate with them.

At this point I was ready to roll with my MO, dazzling you with a thoughtful presentation of wisdom from Walter Wink, inspiration from Leymah Gbowee, and a kick in the pants from Martin Luther King, Jr. on the power and worthiness of peacebuilding in a violent world. I was going to challenge you to flip assumptions about David and Goliath based on Malcolm Gladwell’s moving book, *David and Goliath: Misfits, Underdogs, and the Art of Battling Giants*, but I believe the Spirit has invited me to stop, has invited us to stop. Just stop and listen. These days I find myself, as Gladwell writes, “liable to fear, [and] prone to being afraid of being afraid.” I know I’m not the only one. There is so much going on in our world, and there is even more going on in our little community here than even I know, though the amount I know of is: a lot! This is an intense season for us individually and collectively, often in ways that are not publicly visible or widely known.

I invite us to take a few moments to sit and be still, to pause from girding our loins and powering through pacifist battle in the name of Prince of Peace and The Way of Justice. Take a moment to consider what is impossible in your life right now. What will not go well, but you are in the middle of it anyway? How do you want the Holy Spirit to be present to you in this time?

Between now and November 2024, and certainly beyond, we will be tempted to respond to hate with hate, to anger with anger, to fear with fear, to throw fists and sling revolvers like a noonday western film duel. We will be tempted to robe ourselves in heavy armor that was never made for us. God calls us to a different path. The path of using shepherding tools and being open to Holy Spirit so that we might cross impossible barriers and be at peace, even if only internally.

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6 Green, *Connections*, p.91.