

First Samuel 28: 3-25 "The Séance of Saul" Rev. Janet Chapman 7/14/24

Over the past couple months, we have said farewell to some dearly departed from our congregation. It always gets me to thinking about how we sum up a life in a few words, a very difficult task indeed. Maybe the best idea is what actor Dustin Hoffman requested be placed on his tombstone. All he wants is the simple statement, "I knew this was going to happen." This could be the epitaph for King Saul, for as our scripture shared, the writing was on the wall.

If you have tears, prepare to shed them now. Frederich Buechner, master storyteller, sets the scene for us. The first king of Israel, Saul, had three things going against him almost from the beginning. One of them was the prophet Samuel, the second was a young man named David, and the third and worst of all, was himself. The prophet Samuel never thought Israel should have a king in the first place and told King Saul that on a regular basis. The prophet tries to teach Saul that the rules of engagement in war are not what they used to be. For the people of Israel, war was seen as just one more activity in which God participated, declaring winners and losers in each battle. But after Saul defeats a great army, the prophet says, "We don't go into war to collect the spoils and take the property and possessions of our enemies. Therefore, to prevent such selfishness, everything you take, all those so-called spoils of war, must be destroyed." Consider it just the beginning of God trying to transition people from warlike tendencies to more peaceful practices. It wasn't until Jesus came along with a message of clarification that we begin to see God's true view of violence, where in the Garden of Gethsamane, Jesus says, "Put your sword back in its place; for all who take up the sword will perish by the sword." It seems humanity is still trying to get that through our thick skulls.

But back to King Saul and his victory. His greed couldn't quite justify destroying all the enemies' crops and livestock, so he keeps some not just for himself, but for those around him and when the prophet finds this out, it is the last straw. Samuel tells Saul that Yahweh is done with him and then the prophet sneaks off to find a new king in a young boy named David. A phrase begins to repeat itself again and again in Saul's interaction with the prophet and Yahweh, a phrase that haunts Saul and finally destroys him, "I did what the people wanted....The people wanted it." Earlier on, there was a great worship service happening; all the people of God were gathered and the prophet Samuel was running late. He was getting old so didn't move as fast as he used to and he was running late. They're standing around looking at their sundials, growing impatient, and finally some of the people said, "Saul, you're the king; why don't you just preside at the altar as the priest?" So Saul did. He's in the middle of the liturgy and Samuel shows up asking, "Saul, what are you doing?" "Well, the people said, 'Go ahead, Saul.'" "But that's not your calling Saul." "But the people wanted me to.." Then again, before an important battle, Saul tells all the people to fast to win the favor of God in order to win. "No soldier shall eat." Then the word comes that one of the soldiers has been eating. "Bring him here," says Saul, and it is his own son, Jonathan. Jonathan says, "Yes, I have broken the law. I know the punishment." But the people said, "Aw shucks, cut him some slack – a little bread and honey, what's the big deal?" And the people said... and the people said. Then, not long after secretly anointing David as the new king, the prophet Samuel dies. But Saul's insatiable appetite for public approval does not. He was intoxicated by applause and it is ultimately what brings him down. Some of you may remember George Eliot's novel, Adam Bede,

and how she, the writer, predicts the tragic fall of one of the characters with one sentence – “The opinion of others formed the very air he breathed.” “The people wanted me to.”

Saul is hit so hard by the news that Yahweh is done with him that his faith sours; he no longer trusts in God’s ability or desire to provide wisdom and shelter. Anxious and afraid, he falls to the ground, face in the sand and calls out to an aide, “Go find someone who communes with the dead; find me a fortune-teller.” He had tried a dream book, but none of his dreams were in it. He had tried a Ouija board and tarot cards but they didn’t work. Never mind that he himself had previously issued an edict that anyone practicing fortune-telling, reading tea leaves and crystal balls, anyone communing with the dead would be executed because it was contrary to Israel’s faith in the one God. He was out of options, so in his crisis he says, “Find me a medium.” There’s one in Endor, the servants said. He puts on a disguise, a fake beard, a wig, some old clothes, hoping no one would recognize him, and he goes to her. He has to know how things are going to turn out. He needs to consult the now deceased Samuel, since he and Yahweh were no longer on speaking terms, as far as he was concerned. But she is suspicious. What did he want her to do, get caught by the cops? Only when he swears by Yahweh that he won’t breathe a word, does she begin the séance. In some kind of deep trance, the medium asks the stranger who he wants summoned from the dead. Saul responds, “The prophet Samuel.” We can imagine at this moment her eyes fly open, as only one person in Israel would dare face that fierce old ghost. “You are Saul,” she shrieks, and by that point he is past denying it. Again he says, “Woman, nothing will harm you. Call up Samuel.” She resumes the ritual and then she says, “I see some kind of

ghostly being coming up out of the ground.” “What does it look like?” asks Saul. “It’s an old man in a robe.” He says, “It’s gotta be Samuel.” I regret at this moment that we aren’t sitting around a campfire somewhere in the dark, with the sounds of the woods all around, as this ghost story gets retold but you are just going to have to use your imaginations. This eerie figure rises up from the depths and a voice speaks from nowhere, rumbling deep in your chest, saying, “Why have you disturbed my sleep? Why?” Whether Saul is just too dumb to be terrified at this point, I don’t know, but he blurts out, “I don’t what to do, you gotta help me!” The deep voice responds, “It’s too late for you Saul; you’ll be with me tomorrow.” Cue the tears – there’s no more tragic scene in all of literature! It’s even more tragic, according to Fred Craddock, because this extraordinary man started out in such glory. There’s a pathos about people who once were high and lofty, who had something to give to the world, who attracted such attention, and then it’s gone... like the hall-of-famer, standing on the street corner with an old, faded football jacket, begging for money to feed his habit. In a way, it’s no more sad than any other beggar on the street, except Hall of Fame, seriously? And then the plummet.

They are desperate so they search for anything that might change the outcome. There are well-educated parents who will go out of their way to track down a possible cure for their child, twisted and confined in an iron chair. The doctors have shaken their heads; specialists have turned them away. Then they read an article about an old woman in the Alps who is said to have the power of healing... there’s an old man in Brazil who makes a little porridge out of bark and root and it heals...there’s an evangelist in some place called Redding, CA, who performs miracles. Here they go, there they go. Why? They’re sophisticated,

intelligent people... but they are desperate. Please don't sit on your patio in the high noon of your tranquility and make light of the huts people build in the midnight of their desperation. Desperation makes strange bedfellows and none of us can be sure how we would react.

The most tragic part of this story, I think, is that Saul had forgotten his original calling; he forgot who he was and what he had been commissioned to do. The people wanted different things from their king than God did. Why couldn't he have been satisfied by just touching his beard, remembering the oil of God's anointing streaming down his face and said to himself, "It doesn't matter what people think, God knows I'm king, God made me a king. As long as God knows, that's all that matters." God knows the truth of the matter and that needs to be enough. But honestly, can any of us be satisfied by simply saying, "But God knows"? You have been accused of doing something you didn't do. Can you say, "Well, it doesn't matter, God knows"? You've been criticized unduly, improperly, unjustly and can you say, "I won't let this destroy me, God knows the truth"? Honestly, that seems to be so very hard for me— I don't know about you, but too often I feel this unhealthy need to clear my name, to let the people know it's wrong. I didn't do it. I didn't say it. I wasn't there. Because we rely heavily on our community, our support network, and the respect they give us. But the question is, when does the desire for approval cross over into being erosive, diseased, and finally destructive? How do I know the point at which I am beginning to silence my own conscience and convictions so I can better hear the accolades of others, the approval I so desperately need? This is what truly haunts me about today's ghost story; this is the reality that sparks unrest in a society that applauds victory.

The world is crashing around him and in his hour of desperation, Saul goes to a fortune-teller. There was, you know, another Saul of the tribe of Benjamin, born many years later, named after the first king of Israel. Some of you know him as Paul; he too was in great conflict with himself. In that internal battle, he made casualties of Christians. In a great crisis, a moment of truth, he, too fell to the ground, face in the sand. But in that moment of truth, he didn't go to a fortune-teller. He went to God and it made all the difference, all the difference in the world.