

## “Remembering the Future”

For a lot of folks around here, school starts up again this week. So I’ve been thinking a little bit about what it felt like to go back to school... and I’m wondering whether they lied to us there.

That’s a provocative way to put it, but I’m wondering about some of the stories we were told. There’s the one about George Washington: he got a hatchet for his birthday and promptly chopped down his father’s favorite pet cherry tree. Confronted with the evidence he said, “I cannot tell a lie: I did it with my little hatchet.” As I have grown older I suspect what he may have meant is, “I cannot tell a good enough lie to get myself out of this.” But the message was clear: the Father of our Country told the truth, even when it was costly to do so. Americans value honesty.

Then there’s the story about Abraham Lincoln. I’m a little vague on this, but I recall being taught that before he was president, when he was a shopkeeper in Illinois, Honest Abe once walked five miles to repay a nickel to someone he had overcharged. Again, I now find myself dubious about the historical veracity of this account. But the message is clear: Abraham Lincoln was completely trustworthy, whether in small matters or in large ones. Americans value trustworthiness.

Then there’s that tale so near and dear to us at Plymouth Church: how the peace-loving Pilgrims arrived on these shores because they cherished religious liberty—presumably for everybody. They were welcomed by the Native Americans, who taught them how to grow corn and got together with them at Thanksgiving for turkey and football and they all lived happily ever after, because that’s the kind of place America is: people come together from all over the world and transcend their cultural differences to respect one another and share the bounty of this great land.

These are stories we tell about ourselves. Are we telling the truth?

I raise the question because our lesson for this morning has something of the same sort of hollow ring to it. The wise, aged, beloved and upright King David dies and all Israel mourns: the King is dead. But they also rejoice because he is succeeded by Solomon, a humble and equally righteous chip off the old block: long live the King! While he is on a spiritual retreat, Solomon has a dream in which he is granted three wishes by a *geni*. Oh, no, excuse me, it’s one wish, by *God*. Does Solomon choose wealth? No, no. Does he choose fame? No, no. Does he choose the crushing of the heads of all his political adversaries? No, because by now he has pretty much accomplished most of that. He asks for *wisdom* in order to govern justly. And God is so pleased at the request that God throws in the riches and fame along with the wisdom.

What’s going on here? As has been true all summer, some of the story is illumined by the back-story.

After our protracted journey through the story of David, today's lesson seems sadly anti-climactic. David has faded away. He is old and he can't get warm. So his keepers procure for him a beautiful young virgin to keep him warm at night. One would think a more corpulent bedmate might better suit the purpose, perhaps the Great Boar from the State Fair, but we're dealing in euphemism here. The chosen young woman is Abishag the Shunammite, and the text says bluntly that David did not know her sexually. From the story that has gone before this can only mean that, to borrow a phrase from Genesis, it had ceased to be with David after the manner of men; which meant, in that culture, that he was no longer fit to be king.

Accordingly, much of the focus shifts to succession and establishing Solomon's claim as next in line. Solomon is the son of David and Bathsheba, a dubious union from the get-go.<sup>1</sup> So no less an authority than Nathan the prophet reappears to authenticate God's choice of Solomon as successor.

What we have this morning, then, is the official version of the transition. "Then David slept with his ancestors," it reads, a poignant reminder that eventually all of us become merely a part of the past. He is buried in the City of David, bringing to mind the fact that it was David who united the kingdoms and established the new capitol at Jerusalem. The years of his reign are mentioned: seven years at Hebron, thirty-three years at Jerusalem: nice round numbers.

And immediately the focus turns to Solomon. The text says, "So Solomon sat on the throne of his father David: and his kingdom was firmly established." Then, in the part the lectionary skips, it recounts how Solomon murders his half-brother Adonijah, banishes the chief priest Abithar and kills David's chief of staff Joab. Solomon solidified his power the same way David had: through brutal murder and political intrigue. He's a chip off the old block, all right.

Evidently there are problems with Solomon's image. Here's a verse that "protests too much": "Solomon loved the LORD, walking in the statutes of his father David; only, he sacrificed and offered incense at the high places." (3:1) One of the key elements in uniting the kingdom was establishing uniformity of worship; but one of the crucial ways of earning the allegiance of various groups within the kingdom was worshipping at various shrines: the high places. Solomon made a common practice of this; so the text takes pains to point out that this was only because the Temple had not yet been built. But the fact was that Solomon, throughout his reign, would be criticized for his tolerance of varieties of forms of worship. And the Temple, when it was finally built, was filled with images and architecture borrowed from Canaanite religions.

But here it is at one of the high places that God speaks to Solomon in a dream, reminiscent of God's appearances to Abraham, Jacob and Joseph. When asked what he would like for a coronation present, Solomon begins by offering his remarkably convenient view of history: addressing God, he says, "You have shown great and

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<sup>1</sup> In the Gospel According to Matthew, in the careful genealogy established for Jesus, Bathsheba is not even mentioned by name. It reads, "And David was the father of Solomon *by the wife of Uriah*." (Matthew 1:6b) This would be the precise opposite of sweeping the matter under the rug.

steadfast love to your servant my father David, because he walked before you in faithfulness, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart toward you..." Really?

Evidently Solomon did not have the advantage of our summer sermon series to come to a more balanced view of David. He speaks in the categories and vocabulary of what scholars have come to call the Deuteronomic view of history, in which all events can be understood in terms of faithfulness to the covenant of Moses and attentiveness to proper sacrifices in Jerusalem. If a king is faithful to the covenant, all will be well with the kingdom. If the king is not faithful to the covenant, bad things will happen. There is no room in this view for bad things to happen to good people; bad things happen only to bad people. So if you take this black and white view of things, everybody is either all good or all bad; and David and Solomon are good. It's neat, it's tidy, and it's utterly unlike life as we know it, which is filled with complicated people and complex motivations.

What this portion of the Bible gives us, then, is a Solomonic whitewash. Clearly Solomon was an able administrator who kept together a complex kingdom. And he was quite a builder, building a Temple for God and lavish surroundings for himself. But he accomplished this through heavy taxation and forced labor; he even had a cabinet-level position in charge of forced labor. (4:6) This fostered such resentment that the kingdom split in two almost immediately after Solomon's death. As one scholar writes, "Ambitious and selfish by nature, [Solomon's] lavish court in Jerusalem was a hall of mirrors that reflected the glory and reputation of the great king of Israel."<sup>2</sup> Particularly as the nation split in two and events spiraled out of control it became increasingly important to remember Solomon for his wisdom and "all his glory."<sup>3</sup>

Why do we have the Bible in this form? Walter Brueggemann, renowned biblical scholar, wrote a blog this week with the provocative title, "Remembering an Imagined Past."<sup>4</sup> He criticizes those who would wish to dismiss as unimportant texts that don't square precisely with the historical record, as though they have nothing to say to us simply because they may or may not have happened precisely as depicted. Brueggemann argues, in effect, that texts can contain truth even when they are not factual; and that we need to take them seriously even when we do not take them literally.

In that spirit we must say that there is much about the biblical story of David that is aspirational: it projects onto David an idealized view of what a great ruler should be: faithful and pious, strong and courageous, humble and just. David was all of these things at least in part, but none of them completely. And the Bible tells us enough about him to let us see this for ourselves. That is the truly remarkable thing about this saga: we see his flaws and foibles; the times when he is full of himself; the times when he is consumed by his appetites. But we also see him repent. We see him begin again.

The growing tradition that came to surround David attributed to his authorship many of our most beloved psalms: not only the 23<sup>rd</sup>, "the LORD is my shepherd"; but also the 51<sup>st</sup>, a heart-wrenching psalm of contrition, "create in me a clean heart, O God, and

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<sup>2</sup> Anderson, Bernhard. *Understanding the Old Testament*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1957, page 145.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 6:29.

<sup>4</sup> <http://theolog.org/2009/07/remembering-imagined-past.html>

put a new and right spirit within me.” Psalm 51 is alleged to have been written after David faced his moral failings in his adultery with Bathsheba and murder of her husband. Certainly this is a quality we would earnestly wish for in our leaders: the ability to admit mistakes and ask for forgiveness.

The hymns I chose for this morning’s service would all be appropriate for a funeral. In part that is because what we need to do with this story is not unlike what we do at a memorial service. We remember. We tell the tales. We could catalogue flaws and foibles; but mostly we choose to remember the positive things. Partly we do this because we realize that we, too, will be judged in the clear and revealing light of eternity, which has a sudden way of making flaws seem only human and graces seem divine.

Each generation writes history anew, revisiting these characters who shape us all. We do this not because the stories themselves change so much, but because of our need to see them through the lens of our own times and values and struggles. And in so doing we remember what matters most to us, and who we are called to be.

I don’t know whether Washington never told a lie; but I do know that great leaders tell the truth.

I don’t know whether Lincoln returned that nickel; but I am sure that great leaders know the sacredness of the public trust.

I don’t know precisely what the Pilgrims and the Indians did on the first Thanksgiving; but I do know that the kind of world we all want to live in is a world where differences are valued and the gifts of the earth are shared in gratitude.

I don’t know whether David was pious and powerful and Solomon was wise and just; but the living of faithful lives before God requires all of us to be faithful in our strength and just in our dealings with all people: to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with God. May we learn these stories and teach them to our children; for one way or another we end up living them.

Amen

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