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Proper 9B
Peace, Seattle
July 8, 2012
2 Samuel 5:1-5, 9-10; Mark 6:1-13

THE UNTIDY BACKSTORY

The saga of David's ascension to the throne of a united kingdom continues in this week's reading from 2nd Samuel, and on the face of it, his anointing as king here (which, for those who are keeping track marks the 3rd time he is anointed) looks inevitable, a fate accompli.

In the text before us this morning, David's path to the throne appears smooth, seamless & bloodless. He seems to rise to kingship effortlessly, on the wings of God almighty. There are no moral quandaries, no dubious choices; God's favor and David's choices simply power his candidacy to victory.[1]

But when you dig into the whole narrative, when you dip into the backstory, it's quite a different picture.

This is what happens, often enough, when brief snippets of text are put before us on a Sunday and taken at face value without the opportunity to hear the whole story. The point I'm making, is that there is a certain amount of danger in that.

The "G" rated text before us leaves out so much of the "R" rated elements that accompanied David's long and epic struggle toward the throne:

- the blood and the gore, the betrayals and the turn-abouts,
- the stories of self-sacrifice, loyalty and forbearance;
- the tales of terrible treachery and ghastly episodes of ethnic cleansing—all the material—good, bad, and ugly—that accompanied David's decidedly zigzag path from shepherd boy to ruler.

The danger in stripping the darker "R" elements from the story, or avoiding them until it becomes the "G" rated text we have before us, is at least threefold.

First, it suggests that the biblical world as presented is a sanitized world with no real connection to our own complicated and challenging lives.

Second, it suggests, as Howard Wallace points out, that God's favor is something that is wholly evident and clearly legible, while we know from our own experience that life has a way of calling our "favored status" in the eyes of God into question on a regular basis.[2]

And third, ignoring the darker, more complicated and morally challenging elements of the plot can lead us to conclude that what's being peddled in Scripture is a kind of theology of success with a correlating axiom suggesting that those who find themselves at the unsuccessful end of life's spectrum are lacking in some fundamental way, and are not favored by God.

The fuller text, on the other hand, complete with "uncut" backstory, gives us an insight into the real dilemmas David faced as a person trying to follow God's will, and the desperate struggles in the nation at that time:

This fuller version of events shows us that…

- David's rise is slow, bloody and fraught.

[1] Insights from Howard Wallace @ http://hwallace.unitingchurch.org.au/WebOTcomments/OrdinaryB/Pentecost6.html
[2] Ibid.

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- He is surrounded by honorable men like Abner (who opposes David at the start), and violent men like Joab (who is one of David's supporters).
- David deplores the blood that is shed at various points, but also participates in bloodletting himself.

This picture undercuts the simple view of a theology of success. If God is indeed with David, it seems to be evident only in hindsight. In other words, to the Israelites and Judahites of the day, the world seemed as confused, contradictory, dangerous and violent as our own world does to us.[3]

The untidy backstory gives us a much more realistic, believable picture of David's story. But there is a price to pay – we trade the certainty of black and white for the ambiguity of gray and a more raw, more complicated version that won't allow us to be comfortable.

To the minds of later generations it may appear as if there were no other real alternative to David's ascendancy—whereas there were plenty of them in play at the time, and that's the world that rings true for me.

In a recent article in GATHER magazine entitled WALK THROUGH YOUR LIFE, Kathleen Kastilahn tells the story of when she and four other journalists arrived in Zimbabwe on assignment to report on Lutheran World Federation projects there.[4]

Within hours after landing, their passports were confiscated and they were under arrest as suspected members of an "international media gang" who entered the country under false pretenses.

> "The more we tried to clear ourselves over the next five days, the worse the situation got," she writes. "Using a daybook I'd received for Christmas, I prayed one line over and over again… "May the fear-struck, fearless be."

When life hands us situations of such uncertainty, it's not at all clear the things will end well!
But we look for clues that God is with us in the midst of the muddle. In Kathleen's case, one of those clues came in the form of a churchman from the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Zimbabwe drove 100 miles to sit with the women in prison.

> "You must take this positively," he declared, "Ask, why has God stopped you?"
> "This question," Kathleen writes, "blessed me that day and many, many since."

I wonder if that same question wasn't on Jesus' mind after his experience in his hometown?

On his first trip home after beginning his public ministry the crowds around Jesus were huge.[5]

On his second trip home the crowds were still wall-to-wall, but rumors were circulating—and had his family convinced—that **Jesus wasn't altogether together up here (in head)**. Remember that?[6]

By the time he made his third trip home, which is what Mark captures in today's gospel, reservations about Jesus had turned the corner and were headed toward outright rejection.

The messenger and his message were really beginning to rankle!

WHERE DID HE GET ALL THIS SO-CALLED WISDOM?! the townspeople wonder.
WHY THIS IS JOE AND MARY'S BOY…WE'VE KNOWN HIM SINCE HE WAS A KID.

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[3] Ibid.
[4] *Gather*, published by Augsburg Fortress for Women of the ELCA. June 2012 edition, p. 6f.
[5] Mk 2:1f
[6] Mk 3:19bf

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IMAGINE—HIM TRYING TO TEACH US! WHY I NEVER!

Mark tells us that this rejection by his hometown crowd so profoundly affected Jesus that "HE COULD DO NO DEED OF POWER THERE, EXCEPT THAT HE LAID HIS HANDS ON A FEW SICK PEOPLE AND CURED THEM. AND HE WAS AMAZED AT THEIR UNBELIEF."[7]

On the heels of that rejection, Jesus could have gone off on retreat to reassess his call to ministry! But instead of retreating in the face of vulnerability, Jesus ends up sending the Twelve apostles out on a mission. It's as if he's telling both himself and them, LOOK, LIFE IS MARKED BY SET BACKS MORE THAN SUCCESSES; BUT GOD'S MISSION GOES ON.

The world's solution to vulnerability, whether that vulnerability is real or not, is to arm itself with money, with data, with technology, with firepower. But Jesus commands the disciples to follow a different path.

Did you catch his instructions to the Twelve in verse 8?
He orders them to take nothing for their journey except a staff: No food, no luggage, no travelers checks, no extra clothes, NO VISA card, no smart phone. No weapon.

The point is this: We disciples carry around with us our whole backstory, weaknesses included, instead of a whole lot of things to protect ourselves. It helps us remember that each one of us, on any given day, can be as much a part of the problem in this world as we are a part of the solution, and we must trust in and rely on the mercy and strength of God to accomplish what needs doing around us.

And though we often enough find ourselves without our luggage or our defenses or our supplies when we think we need them most, we never fail to find strength in the company of each other.

We share our stories—as full of angst and of convoluted back story as they may be—and we stand beside one another, trying to discern and to live out Christ's mission in our daily lives, constantly reminding each other of who we are, beloved sons and daughters of God. Amen.

[7] MK 6:5-6