

“Strength in Weakness”

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2 Samuel 5:1-5, 9-10 2 Corinthians 12:2-10

We've been reading the story of David for the last few weeks. But it's a long story, so we've just been reading the highlights. First David was anointed to become king even though Saul was already the king and David was only a shepherd boy. Then we read the story of David and Goliath, how this young boy killed the giant Philistine enemy. Last week we read David's lament at the death of King Saul and his son Jonathan. And this morning Susan read that all the elders of the tribes of Israel came to David and they anointed him as king.

By what we read in church, you might think the transition of power from King Saul to King David was easy. But it was NOT. Before Saul died, he was determined to kill David, and kept David hiding on the run. And after Saul died, there was a long and bloody battle for leadership. David had settled in Judah and reigned there for over seven years. And I might mention that during that time, six sons were born to him from six different women. (Yet another example of why we don't use “biblical marriage” as a model for today.)

At that time, Judah and Israel were not united. While David was king of Judah, one of Saul's sons, Ishbaal, became king of Israel, and a civil war broke out between them. David grew stronger and Ishbaal's general, Abner, defected to David's side. David accepted him with one condition: Abner had to bring Saul's daughter Michal with him. Michal was David's first wife (1 Sam. 18:20-27), but she had stayed loyal to Saul's family when they split with David. So Abner went to get her. One small problem: she had since married someone else. So Abner had to take her away from her husband. And her husband walked behind her all the way to Judah, weeping, until Abner finally told him to go home.

So the covenant was sealed between David and Abner. But then David's general, Joab, killed Abner, because earlier Abner had killed Joab's brother. Then Ishbaal was killed by two of his own captains. Then the captains were killed by David when they came to report Ishbaal's death. And after he was anointed, David marched to Jerusalem, which was occupied by a Canaanite tribe, the Jebusites. David and his warriors sneaked into this well-fortified city through the water system and took it, killing more people, even attacking the blind and the lame. And Jerusalem became David's capital city (2 Sam. 5:6-8). You get the picture. David was powerful, effective, and responsible for a lot of bloodshed. And 2 Samuel concludes that “David became greater and greater, for the Lord, the God of hosts was with him.” (v.10)

This is a troubling thing to say. What does it mean to say that God is with someone? Did God help David kill people? If people are *not* successful in war or in life, does that mean that God is NOT with them? In many ways David was a godly man. He was faithful, righteous and brave. He never ridiculed or hurt King Saul, even though Saul was falling apart emotionally and vowed to kill David. David was a good politician, but he took many wives, just for the political benefit. And he seemed to feel no guilt over killing people to get his way, or to make a point.

The story of David, and most of the Old Testament, offers us one theology of success, which goes like this: if you are faithful and godly, God will be with you and if God is with you, you will succeed. Therefore, since David was successful, he must have been faithful and godly, no matter how many people he killed.

But the New Testament offers a different view. Jesus was faithful and godly, and God was definitely with Jesus. But Jesus was not successful or great by worldly standards. He held no earthly position to command respect. In fact he renounced worldly power. And the spiritual power he had, he never tried to keep for himself. He wanted others to have the same power he had. He sent his disciples out and gave them authority to do everything he could do. Jesus never killed anyone, or tried to defend himself. He was rejected in his hometown, and rejected by the religious leaders. And he was crucified by the Romans, a humiliating and horrible death. He was hardly a success in the eyes of the world. Yet God was (and is) with him.

Paul was a powerful follower of Jesus. He spread the gospel to the entire known world. But his mission was filled with trials and controversy. He was ship-wrecked, run out of town, slandered, stoned, imprisoned, and most likely executed for following Jesus. Yet God was with him.

Often people think that when something bad happens, God is punishing them, or at least has disappeared. But Diane read from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians (12:10) this morning, "Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong." It seems that Paul was under attack in Corinth by what he called "super-apostles" (11:5 and 12:11), leaders who were competing for power. They denounced Paul, claiming to be superior to him. Paul turned their arguments against them. He said he had every right to boast, and could even beat his competition that way. But he refrained from boasting (kind of) so that "no one may think better of me than what is seen in me or heard from me." We are not to judge others by what they brag about themselves, but by what we actually see in their words and deeds. And even that is not a true test of whether God is with someone, because God does not depend on our wisdom or eloquence or righteousness. God's power works through fallible human beings.

Paul wrote God's power is perfected in weakness, because it's not our own ability and strength that matters in the end, but God's spirit working in and through us. Our culture tells us that if we are rich, famous or successful in some other way, we've made it. We are blessed. But no one can tell whether a person is being faithful to God or whether God is with them, by the earthly blessings that come their way. The fact that I am married, have had three children and am living comfortably does not necessarily mean that God is with me. Jesus was not a success by worldly standards, and we have to be careful as his followers, not to confuse the Old Testament theology of success with the way of Christ.

Some evangelical Christians insist that this nation was founded on Christian principles, and if we stray from any of those principles, God will turn away from us. Which principles are they talking about? Turn the other cheek? Love your enemies? That's not how we won the Revolutionary War. We celebrate our independence with bombastic displays of fireworks, not by rejoicing in our weakness. Maybe those who insist we are a Christian nation are confusing Christianity with Old Testament theology. But do we really want to imitate David's mass murder of the Philistines? Our founding

fathers did not intend to create a Christian nation. They explicitly guarded against mixing religion with politics. Yes, religious beliefs will affect our values and how we organize ourselves and make laws. But we are not a Christian nation, and that's not a bad thing.

Jesus had no interest in founding a nation, and he showed no trace of patriotism. He did say we should pay our taxes, give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar (Mk. 12:17). But Jesus never spoke of any further duty to the government, nothing about honor or service to country. We are to serve God. And Jesus' way of non-violence is far from America's dealings with the world, starting with our slaughter of American Indians, up to our drone strikes today and their collateral damage.

I am grateful to be able to live in this country. I am grateful for freedom of speech and religion and the rule of law. People are not generally arrested here for raising questions or criticizing people in power. I am grateful for our vast natural resources, so that no one has to starve to death, and we are able to provide a basic free education for our people. I am proud that we have a multi-cultural president, and it was a peaceful and reasonable transfer of power. We still have a long way to go. Not everyone is equal in this country. We are still dealing with racism and prejudice, and unhealthy economic gaps between the rich and the poor. And our dealings with the rest of the world are sometimes arrogant or ignorant. But there are many things about this country that are great, and I am thankful to be an American.

However, our greatness does not lie in our ability to defeat enemies or get our way in the world. If we were to call ourselves a Christian nation, we would define our greatness in how we care for the poor, the sick and the outcasts, how we educate our children, and how we welcome strangers and foreigners. We would define our greatness by how we love our enemies and refuse to seek revenge and control, and our willingness to sacrifice, not just to protect our own economic interests, but for the sake of truth and for the good of others. Does that lead to success? Maybe not on the battlefield. In fact, we might look weak in the eyes of the world. But for Christians, that's not what it's about. Our call is to serve and glorify God and work for God's kingdom, on earth as it is in heaven.

One of the rituals of the July 4th weekend, at least in this church, is to sing "America" (O Beautiful for Spacious Skies). I love this hymn, because it's not a triumphant song that boasts of God's favor and power, but rather a humble prayer. God, give us grace; help us to live as brothers and sisters. God, mend our flaws; help us to control ourselves and honor our laws. God, refine our gold, our money; help us to define our success by nobleness, not wealth. God, give us grace; and help us to live as brothers and sisters.

May we lift up our weaknesses and flaws, trusting God's grace and looking to God for strength, and join together and sing hymn # 338, O Beautiful for Spacious Skies. Amen.