

“A SONG OF ASCENTS”

a sermon on I Samuel 16:1-13, Ephesians 5:8-14, John 9:1-41
March 26, 2017 by Dr. Gregory A. Goodwiller
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Israel’s three greatest “heroes” in the ongoing drama of the restoration of their relationship with God after the fall (which was the Old Testament Lesson for the *first* Sunday of Lent), were (without doubt) Father Abraham – who left Ur of the Chaldeans to head out to the land God promised to show him (our reading two weeks ago); Moses, who led the children out of bondage in Egypt and into to the wilderness where they prepared to “inherit” the land (last week’s reading), and then of course Israel’s greatest King, *David*, who (eventually) ruled a united monarchy, achieved peace at Israel’s borders (more or less), and became the chosen “line” of rulers that God promised would “be established” over Israel *forever*.

As the stories in their contexts make very clear, none of three were without their problems, sins, and shortcomings, and their lives were *messy*. At the same time, they all demonstrated an essential quality necessary in the development of God’s “plan” for the people of Israel. They were all *open* to God’s voice – including that voice sending them in new or unforeseen directions.

David is the subject of today’s Old Testament reading. He was *only* God’s chosen and anointed one because God became “sorry” that He had ever chosen Saul in the first place. And at the time of David’s anointing by Samuel, he was just a *boy*, really. But he was eventually “pressed into” the king’s service because he could play the lyre, which “soothed” the king’s internal daemons, he spent his early years *slowly* building a following, and eventually a fighting force more loyal to him than the king. Through that process, the kingship – and the promise – passed from Saul’s family to the line of David.

The people of Israel *knew* that David’s story was *messy*, and that the King certainly had “flaws” of his own. But still, they loved their stories about the “ruddy” and “handsome” young man, who became their greatest king. And the *temple* community in Jerusalem loved almost among all else that he was also a poet and a musician.

This sermon is entitled “A Song of Ascents.” The “Songs of Ascents” are a collection of fifteen Psalms, beginning, in our English Bibles, at Psalm 120.

Although there are a number of theories about how and when they were sung, think of them as “Pilgrim Psalms” – the psalms that faithful Israelites would sing together as they made their way to Jerusalem for nation’s great *festivals* back in the days of the monarchy . . . and later as well, after the exile, when they rebuilt the temple. Jerusalem was quite literally “up” on a hill, and so Pilgrims going to the holy city literally had to “ascend” to get there. Anyone from the delta understands that concept. Just start driving east, and eventually you have to start ascending if you want to keep going!

Another tradition, by the way, is that the Levitical priests sang these psalms as they “ascended” each of the fifteen steps into the Temple itself – one psalm per step.

And it may well be that *both* traditions are true.

The Songs of Ascents are among the best loved and most *utilized* psalms in the entire psalter. They are all brief, and no doubt, most faithful Israelites committed them to memory at an early age. They are written (in their original Hebrew) in a very simple, almost “melodic” form, and they are all very *hopeful* words.

Not that they “sugar coat” Israel’s history. The very first one of them, Psalm 120, begins, “in my distress I cry to the LORD,” and ends on a rather somber tone with the statement, “I am for peace; but when I speak, *they* are for war!”

And Psalm 124 begins with the acknowledgement that “If it had not been the LORD who was on our side, let Israel now say . . . then they would have swallowed us up alive, when their anger was kindled against us; then the flood would have swept us away, the torrent would have gone over us.”

But you see, the point of all of that “communal memory” was to keep ever before the people, and especially so as they made their way to the holy city for their great festivals, taking with them all of their life’s problems and challenges, looking for guidance and praying for God’s favor, that God always *had been* with them in the midst of their troubles, and so they could now count on God to again guide them on the path forward.

At their best, that is how the Israelites (even in Jesus’ day) approached Jerusalem – the place, after all, where we too are headed in this Lenten Journey – mindful of the past, both the good, and the bad, but also hopeful and expectant. Israel’s great faith stories taught them when times are challenging, God has *already* chosen the next “anointed one” to carry on the work of fulfillment and

restoration, and that God *always* had a plan . . . if we are just open to hearing it, and willing to pursue it.

But to listen to the Pharisees with whom Jesus had to deal during his ministry, you would never know that. They were not *looking* for something new, it seems. Moses was their prophet, as they make very clear, and this man Jesus, who came performing kinds of miracles they had never seen before, and doing so in ways that broke their rules about the *proper* way to do such things even if they *were* open to the idea, which they were not, was just too much for them.

To be fair, what Jesus said and did was *really* radical. And it constantly challenged their long-existing social norms. From last week's story of the Samaritan woman at the well, to this morning's healing of a man blind from his birth (which they took to be a sure sign of God's judgement for his *parent's* sins, rather than an opportunity, as Jesus put it, "that the works of God might be made manifest through him"), and not only that, but performing the act *on the Sabbath*, the holy day of rest, when no "work," even *good* work, was supposed to be performed.

And that, I would contend, is the great "Lenten Challenge." How do we remain "hopeful and expectant," while also *honoring* what has gone before? It's a *tension*. And we have to somehow *hold* the tension. That is to say, we can't just *give in* to *either* side of the tension. On the one hand, we can't be like the Pharisees, so firm in their convictions about the past that they weren't *open* seeing God at work in their midst in new and creative ways. But on the *other* hand, we have to view – and even *evaluate* – what presents itself as God's new and creative calling and work in light of what God has done in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, which in turn was the ultimate *fulfillment* of God's work in calling Abraham, speaking and acting through Moses, and unifying the people of Israel under their great King, David.

At the beginning of our Gospel lesson, it says that *the disciples* first raised the issue of why the blind man was blind. "Who sinned, this man, or his parents?"

And I love that Jesus immediately "reframed" the question, by denying both of what, for the disciples, seemed to be the only two possible *options*. "Neither this man *nor* his parents sinned." That is to say, being truly *open* to God's guidance and direction means being open to the possibility that there are *other* options than just the ones that seem obvious to us.

This may be a bit of a stretch, but I am reminded of Fisher and Ury's classic book on negotiation, *Getting to Yes*. The really creative part of their process they call "inventing options for mutual gain."

When I teach their book as part of my conflict management workshops I point out that if you want to know where (or *if*) God's Spirit is present in the process, *that* is it – in not just *accepting* the options presented by the parties in a dispute, but getting *behind* them, and allowing ourselves to be inspired to see new opportunities we hadn't even *thought* of that (again, in conflict management theory language), satisfy what is really *important* to the parties', which are called their "essential interests."

That, for example, is what I contend the early church was able to do in getting past its Jewish Christian vs. Gentile Christian controversy in the book of Acts.

But the point is, Jesus *never* accepted "either or" kinds of answers or solutions. Are you the King of the Jews," Pilate would eventually ask him? He answered with something *other than* a yes or a no. He replied, "you have said so."

With the pilgrims making their way up into the hills to attend the festivals at Jerusalem, who sang songs of hope and trust, may we continue our Lenten journey to Jerusalem no less hopeful and expectant – and may we also not simply be "passive observers" waiting for God to act, but instead keep our eyes open to new opportunities God may be opening up for the healing of the nations and the restoration of the earth, in large or even in small ways, and in which *we* might be given opportunities to participate – we, unworthy, temporal, imperfect pilgrims, because of the *abundance* of God's mercy and Grace.

And to God be the glory.