

September 11, 2022

Come to the Table
1 Samuel 30 | Matthew 6: 9-13

In the breathless coverage of the death of Queen Elizabeth II this week and the passing of the English throne to King Charles III, I'm sure all of us have given some thought to the process of how monarchs come to their power. By now it would be hard to have missed the story of Elizabeth's rise. She never really should have become queen. The throne actually belonged to her uncle, Edward VIII, and she became heir only after he abdicated to his younger brother. Elizabeth's father, George VI, died young, and left the crown to her as a young woman of 25. There was never any real question that Charles would become king - unless his mother outlived him, which he must have wondered about as he aged into his seventies. No, the only uncertainty was how the royal family might treat his wife, Camilla, given the legacy of pain involved with Charles's first wife Diana. But Queen Elizabeth did them a big favor this year by making public her wish that Camilla would rule with Charles as queen. These details - and more - have been on an endless loop of coverage this week.

But I suppose it's just an ancient Christian tradition to obsess over who sits on the throne today, and who will sit on it tomorrow. That's certainly where we find David in today's text. He has been anointed by Samuel to become king of Israel, but he is still anxious to secure his place as Saul's successor. David's military experience has matured from leading militias in small skirmishes to commanding forces in significant battles. He's cultivated a loyal following of his own and the people have begun to see him as their savior in war. David's reputation now rivals that of the king. "Saul has killed his thousands," the people have begun to chant. "David his tens of thousands." The Amalekites have recently raided two cities held by the Hebrews. David arrives to find a ghost town, the buildings burned; the fields ruined; the people taken captive. This is a defining moment in David's rise. Although he's increased in notoriety and won the favor of the people, the strain of continued war is wearing on the country and there's even talk that David might be replaced by his own army - or stoned. But the latest raids have insulted David personally. Among the prisoners of Amalek are David's own wives, Abigail and Ahinoam. So with a quick consultation with the prophets and a blessing by the priest, David pursues Amalek's army to avenge these conquests and liberate their prisoners. Gafney translates what happens next:

David smote them from twilight until the evening of the morrow. None of them escaped, except four hundred young men who mounted camels and fled. And David rescued all who the Amalekites took; David rescued his two wives. None was missing, whether young or old, daughters or sons, spoil or anything that they took for themselves; David brought back everything.

According to the historian of Israel, this is a heroic settling of the scores. David reclaims what the Hebrews had lost and restored his own household. The completeness of his victory silences his doubters and smooths his path to the crown.

As with so much of the historian's narrative of David's reign, there are so many problems with this story that we might discuss. Among them are the problems with David's character and the norms of the community described here. There are the issues of war, and whether Israel belongs on the land that it is fighting for in the first place. There is the text's treatment of women and children, and others without power in the tale. But what's most worthy of the church's attention today is the strange idea of the hero's uncomplicated victory. "David brought back everything."

There probably is some kernel of historical truth to David's battlefield successes, but scenes like this are as much legend as history. He pursues the army with the priest's blessing. According to the historian, David the face of Israel's rise, but God is the invisible hand making it possible. Things go well for David as long as he remembers this. The trouble starts when he disconnects his own experience from God's presence, and confuses God's achievements for his own. The tension between individual significance and collective identity is one of the things that interests me about the British crown. At times the Royal family seems absurdly aloof and disconnected from reality - but they also know that their power is ultimately grounded in public support - and so the crown occasionally, if only in a spirit of self-preservation, makes concessions to public opinion. Even the British royals seem to understand that none of us survives alone.

Our church's experience in recent years has made this more clear to us than ever. Our desire to build community rich in relationships, embracing our interdependence, seeking a basis of mutuality and reciprocity in life together, is at the heart of our invitation beginning this new program year. Come to the Table, we're saying, because here is a place where no one has to go it alone. Come to the Table because it's not enough for the story to be all about one person. Come to the Table because we've experienced how strange and lonely life can be without a community to surround and sustain us.

This summer we have been leaning into an old and familiar rhythm in our life together, but we're sort of out of practice. It's hard to believe that we haven't had Sunday school classes here since March of 2020. So many of our programs and ministries have been living under some kind of alternate pandemic plans - meeting online, meeting outdoors, meeting less regularly. But today we are aiming for a rich and full life of community together. We have 23 teachers ready to welcome children into Sunday school classes after worship. Our Youth Group and Confirmation classes are meeting. Our choirs for children, youth, and adults will be singing with full throats and open hearts. La Mesa will be meeting in the Assembly Hall. Community groups are in session. We've even just released an invitation to the congregation's fall retreat to Blowing Rock. The Adult Forum will welcome Jackie Jenks, the CEO of the Interfaith Council, and Ronald Carnes, who has lived experience of homelessness, to invite us into advocacy and service alongside those in our community who are unsheltered.

The Apostle Paul once wrote to the Corinthian Church that he could not continue in his work all alone. He said that in his journeys through Asia it had appeared that all was lost. He and his small band were lost and alone, “utterly crushed, forced down so that we despaired of living.” Through faith in God, he testifies, he was sustained by the prayers of the Corinthian community. When we could not pray and give thanks, he wrote to them, their prayers on his behalf saw him through.

So we are not deceived by the hero’s narrative, even when it is championed in scripture. No more than David saved Israel without God’s help have we come to this place on our own accord. No more than the queen can reign without the consent of her subjects can we be a church without a rich and mutually generous community of friends and neighbors. There is no one here who was not reminded in the isolation of the pandemic days what a blessing it is to be surrounded by people who care and help to carry the load.

Church is a potluck meal. There is a lot on offer here, and everyone has something to bring. We all need to be fed. Don’t try to do it all yourself. Remember that the grace of God is at the center of the story. It is such a privilege for us to gather and to worship, to be a part of our neighbors lives. So come to the table and find your place here.

Amen.