

King Saul...and the wilderness

Let us pray.

Let us hear the voice crying out in the wilderness,

“Make straight a way for the Lord.”

So open our ears, O Lord of the Hours,

to hear your word and know your voice.

Speak to our hearts, and strengthen our wills,

that we may serve you now and always. Amen

Saul. Who *was* Saul?

Saul was the first King of Israel. Today I'd like to talk about what the Book of Samuel says about Saul's life, his death, and to share what his tale might teach us, for, though he was a king, Saul was like us in many ways.

Before the Israelites came to the prophet Samuel demanding a king, Scripture relates that Samuel had grown too old to lead anymore. His successors as judges and leaders were corrupt and dishonest, and Israel was surrounded by many enemies. So,

it is understandable that the people cried out for a king who would bring them victory and justice. Despite Samuel's serious misgivings, he did as God commanded and sought one to become the king of Israel. He was led to Saul, a member of the smallest family among the tribe of Benjamin, who were the smallest tribe in Israel.

Scripture describes Saul as a *king full of valor and of God's Spirit*. We are told Saul looked every part a king, *handsome and taller than all around him*, and that in every battle against Israel's enemies, *"wherever he turned, he routed them."*¹ And it was good that Saul did, for the Israelites were constantly fighting for survival after arriving back from Egypt,

But even while winning battle after battle, Saul's personal flaws were emerging. Impatient with Samuel's tardiness before one battle, Saul took it upon himself to make sacrifices to God which were reserved for Samuel as God's prophet. Saul's arrogance at doing this angered God, and Samuel warned Saul, saying *"You have not kept the command the LORD your God gave you; if you had, the LORD would have established your kingdom over Israel for all time. But now your kingdom will not endure."*²

¹ 1 Samuel 14:47

² 1 Samuel 13: 14-15

Later in Saul's rule as king, Samuel directed him to utterly destroy the capital city of the Amalekites³, a longtime enemy of Israel. But after soundly defeating them in battle, Saul chose to follow his own desires rather than God's, sparing the Amalekite king for ransom and preserving the finest livestock and goods. Saul's repeated disobedience was enough for God to instruct Samuel to begin to search for another king to take Saul's place, and Samuel told Saul: "*Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, He has rejected you as king.*"

At hearing this, Saul fell at Samuel's feet and begged for God's forgiveness, but Samuel replied: "*The LORD has torn the kingdom of Israel from you today and has given it to your neighbor who is better than you. Moreover, (God) does not lie or change His mind, for He is not a man, that He should change His mind.*"

And, just as Samuel had been led to Saul to be appointed as king, so was he directed by God to a boy named David, who he secretly anointed as God's choice to replace Saul.⁴ Then came the famous confrontation, where an undersized David killed the giant Philistine champion named Goliath with a simple slingshot and stone.

³ 1 Samuel 15: 1-3

⁴ 1 Samuel 16

After this, Saul heard how the people cried David's name much louder and longer than his, and he grew jealous and suspicious of David, feelings that grew and deepened with time as Saul held them in his heart. Saul tried to kill David twice himself and, after David fled, sent his troops hunting for him, with orders to kill any who helped David, and many suffered because of Saul's wrath and bitterness.

Saul's kingship ends much as it began. The Philistines had gathered again and marched against Israel, and Saul went out to meet them. But Samuel was dead by this time, and God would not answer Saul's prayers for guidance. In desperation he turned to a witch, a talker to spirits, who conjured up Samuel's ghost. The spirit told Saul that he and his sons would all fall to the Philistines the next day, telling him:

(The LORD) has done exactly what He spoke through me: The LORD has torn the kingship out of your hand and given it to your neighbor David. Because you did not obey the LORD or carry out His burning anger against Amalek, the LORD has done this to you today. Moreover, the LORD will deliver Israel with you into the hands of the Philistines, and tomorrow you and your sons will be with me.

At hearing this Saul fell to the ground, inconsolable with despair. Yet, even knowing he was doomed, Saul went out to battle one last time. As prophesied by Samuel, the Philistines defeated Saul and his army, killing all three of Saul's sons, and at the end of the battle, Saul fell on his own sword, rather than be captured.

So, that is Saul's story, his rise and fall as the first king of Israel. Saul was a mighty king, a strong fighter, pious, merciful towards his enemies, and still loyal to God and to Israel even when he knew all was lost...but he was also *impatient, greedy, disobedient, arrogant, jealous, bitter, and wrathful*...in other words, very human, and very like us, with all our good and our bad.

And because he was flawed, more than many other figures we encounter in the Bible, he is also more relatable, and can serve as an example for us in the times we are living in today. We can all think of times when we've felt or acted as Saul did, perhaps not letting go of some grievance we had, and instead holding it close to our heart and letting it grow and fester, as Saul had against David. Or of other times where we were jealous or envious of someone else's life and success, instead of being grateful for what we have. I can testify to having each of Saul's flaws in myself at one time or another, and struggling to not let those feelings control my actions, however right they seemed at the time. And, I haven't always succeeded at winning out over those negative feelings, any more than Saul did. I think most of us can say the same.

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Whenever I hear Saul's story, I'm always drawn to his final night, after he had heard his fate from Samuel and knew what awaited him the next day: defeat and

death, not just for himself, but for his entire family. The despair and desolation he felt would mirror in many ways the agony that Christ went through in the garden of Gethsemane, the evening before his arrest and crucifixion. And I think Saul's suffering and desolation is something many of us can relate to this year in particular.

If you'll remember, the theme for Lent this year was "the wilderness." In Saul's last night, he was a man cast down into his own personal wilderness, forsaken by God as king and believing that any hope was a false one. How often this year I've felt the same way. It has felt like Lent never really ended, that we're living in a perpetual Holy Saturday, caught between Christ's death and his rising, awaiting an Easter that never truly arrives. And like the Apostles on Holy Saturday, not knowing what was about to happen, today our country is gripped in the paired uncertainty of a pandemic that goes on and on seemingly without end, and also in a social reckoning that is forcing us to confront that we have not lived up to the ideals that both Jesus and our own conscience have called us to.

And it's hard. Even as we're going through this, we still cannot gather together as a congregation; we rarely see one another, or our loved ones. We can't touch or hug or shake each other's hands, and we're forced to keep our distance from other people. For some of us, these times have also meant economic stress and insecurity, or even losing jobs that helped define us. For others, the mental strain has added pressure to lives that were already barely being held together.

In a lot of ways, it feels like we are still out in the wilderness, and like Saul, it can seem like all the future holds for us is more bad news to come. It feels like things may never be normal again. It may even feel like our prayers are not heard, that God is indifferent or absent, that we have been left alone to face the wilderness. All that, too, I have felt more these days as this situation has gone on and on and on.

But something that is also true about the wilderness, is that while it often is lonely and difficult, we can hope that there is *purpose* to our suffering, even if we cannot discern what it might be. The wilderness is always *transformative* – we never emerge from it the same as we entered. For Saul, he had become so entwined with his role as king that, when his own time of wilderness came, he would not face his own flaws and change to become the man and leader that God wanted him to be. Saul is also a cautionary note about the wilderness: we can't know going into it how long we will wander there, and the wilderness is strewn with the bones of those who either could not or would not find their way out. The transformation that the wilderness called them to undergo was something they resisted, or feared, or were too comfortable with their old ways to heed God's call, just as Saul resisted his.

Jesus' message for us is that we aren't our job, our usefulness, our health, or even our body's life. When we trust only in ourselves, when we try to control everything so we can feel safe from the world, we are fooling ourselves. Disaster can suddenly sweep through our lives like a great wave and change everything

overnight. But, it has always been so. We've all known someone whose life was turned upside down by a cancer diagnosis, or by a sudden layoff from a job they'd had for years, or by the unexpected death of someone we'd always thought would be there. Maybe *you've* been the person something like that has happened to, where nothing is the same ever again.

What God wants us to learn through Saul's life is that the security we wrap ourselves in is more ephemeral, more illusionary, more temporary than we would like it to be. The only thing that we can rely on, in the end, is God's love for us, and that as part of God's love, He calls us to be the best person we can be: to love, to forgive, to be generous, to be benevolent, in the bad times as well as the good. We are drawn into the wilderness not to remain as we are, but to change, to confront our fears, and to have faith that God is with us and will not abandon us.

But on the harder days, when our faith is weak and uncertainty and despair prevail, when heeding the call to change is just too much, perhaps King Saul can serve as one final example for us, as a man who faced his last day knowing he woke to his own death and the end of everything that made him who he was, and still strapped on his sword and armor, and went forward and did what he was called to do, even to his end.

May we each have the fortitude to face what may come with the same courage and fortitude Saul displayed. May we each have the faith to leave the outcomes in God's hands. And may God remind us that, even in our own wilderness, the path that lies before us is no more than a continuation of the path behind us that brought us to today, and to trust we will not be abandoned or forsaken, even in the darkness and uncertainty of these days.

God willing, let it be so.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.