

## No Comment

Sermon  
Rev. Rebecca Clancy  
II Samuel 11  
I Timothy 2:11-15

David of Bethlehem is just as the Bible describes him – one of the “great ones of the earth.” The magnitude of his accomplishments and influence ranks David with but a handful of individuals throughout all history. His life story is, in a word, phenomenal.

David first entered Saul’s court quite by happenstance. His older brothers were soldiers in Saul’s army, and David went, at his father’s behest, to the field of battle to deliver his brothers food supplies. It was on the field of battle that David encountered Goliath – a gigantic Philistine mercenary who had rendered the army of Israel, down to the last man, impotent with terror. Goliath had demanded that the battle between the Philistines and Israel be fought one on one, that a soldier from the army of Israel be put forward to fight against him. David was eager to take him on. Though only a youth, not old enough even to serve in the army, he had faith in himself and faith in his God. He pled with Saul to be allowed to fight Goliath. So confident was David that he declined to be suited with armor and went to meet Goliath with but five smooth stones. As it turned out, he needed but one. Amidst Goliath’s jeers and taunts, David, a stone in his sling, rushed upon Goliath and struck him dead.

Saul could not help but take notice of David. He retained David as his armor bearer and upon discovering that David was too an accomplished musician, kept him near at hand to

play the lyre for him to sooth his nerves when they became over strained by the pressures of war.

Saul's son Jonathon too took notice of David. Though Jonathon was in line for the throne, he instantly abdicated his right to David -- endowed him with his own sword and bow. Jonathon was himself a great man, but he recognized the greater man and had the sense to make way for him.

David proved himself an indomitable warrior and came quickly to lead the army of Israel. He knew only victory on the field of battle and soon made himself the hero of the people.

Saul, however, did not, like his son, have the sense to make way for the greater man. He grew increasingly jealous, paranoid, and self-destructive. Before long he declared David to be his mortal enemy and forced David to flee his court and live by his wits in the wilderness.

When Saul's self-destructiveness culminated in his suicide on the field of battle, the House of Saul naturally retained political power. Yet through what can only be described as feats of tactical brilliance, David finessed the loyalty of the House of Saul and was shortly proclaimed king of a united Israel. He then marched on Israel's remaining enemies, defeated them, captured Jerusalem as his capitol, and set the Ark of the Covenant upon Mt. Zion. The nation of Israel was born.

But there's more. David was in his greatness so unparalleled, so distinguished, that it came to be believed that the election of Israel would be fulfilled through his lineage. And so David became the inspiration of the doctrine of Messianism, the belief that a messiah in the line of David would fulfill election of Israel. And so it happened. The election of Israel was indeed fulfilled when Jesus Christ, the Son of David, hung on his cross.

*And then came the episode we just heard recounted in our Old Testament lesson.* Some time later, David's army, led by his general Joab, was on the field of battle. David remained behind in Jerusalem. From the rooftop of his palace he spied a beautiful woman and enquired as to her identity. He was told that she was Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah, one of his thirty elite soldiers. Careless of that fact, he summoned her to the palace, had sex with her, and impregnated her. Suddenly he found himself in something of an untenable position. Uriah was on the field of battle. How could his wife have become pregnant? How indeed, except by another man? And so he recalled Uriah from the field of battle and did everything within his power, including plying him with strong drink, to induce him to have sex with his wife. But Uriah would not. Uriah, a man of nobility and principle, refused himself any pleasure while his General Joab and his fellow soldiers were on the field of battle.

And so David sent, by Uriah's own hand, a letter to Joab demanding that Uriah be sent on a suicide mission. Upon Uriah's death, David brought Bathsheba into the palace and married her.

The great David also did this. It is difficult to comment on such a contradiction, and so I will simply say of it “no comment” and move ahead to our epistle lesson.

Paul of Tarsus too was one of the great ones of the earth. He is the first Christian theologian and without question the foremost Christian theologian of all time. In terms of his influence upon our culture he is considered second only to Jesus Christ. His life story, like David’s, is phenomenal.

Paul was born to privilege. Not only was he a Roman citizen which, for a Jew in the first century, was nearly unheard of, he was educated at the feet of the most reputable theologian of the day, Gamaliel. Thereafter, he joined the ranks of Pharisees, the religious elites, and even among the elites he was the most elite of them all. The law had by this time proliferated to such an extent that it would have taken years just to read it all, yet Paul was, by his own admission, “under the law blameless.” He was so righteous and so sure of his righteousness that he had few qualms about persecuting a sect that had newly arisen within Judaism, a sect that came to be called Christianity. When one of its adherents, Steven, made the case for Jesus Christ before the San Hedrin, Paul oversaw his stoning.

Shortly thereafter Paul was traveling along the road to Damascus. Suddenly he heard the voice of Jesus Christ cry out from a blinding light, “Why do you persecute me?” Paul was led blind into Damascus where it was disclosed that he had been elect to be the missionary to the Gentiles. He embraced his calling with unparalleled zeal. Despite being

stoned, shipwrecked, whipped, and imprisoned, he more than anyone else laid the foundation for the Christian church.

But above all was his theological acumen. His was the rare combination of talent, training, and inspiration. He and he alone in his day fathomed the meaning and import of the Christ event. His brilliance shines forth from the many epistles he bequeathed the church. One of the high water marks of his epistles was his letter to the Galatians.

Because the first Christians were all Jews, it is not particularly surprising that circumcision was required of all those entering the church. Paul discerned that this was a mistake. All that was required to enter the church, he realized, was belief in Jesus Christ. But this meant *anyone* could enter the church, even those from whom the Jews had distanced themselves for centuries. Surely this couldn't be the case, the church equivocated, the effects would be revolutionary. They were, and for Paul this was the whole point. And so he wrote to the Galatians the words which would endow the church with a universal constituency, "There is now no longer Jew or Greek, no longer slave or free, no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

Then, came the epistle we heard recounted in this morning's epistle letter, Paul's epistle to Timothy. Much later in his life, toward its close, knowing full well that women had been indispensable to the church -- that they had been among the first converts, that they converted the men within their influence, that they, often at risk, had led worship services

in their homes, Paul wrote, “Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or have authority over a man. She is to keep silent.”

The same great Paul did this. It is again difficult to comment on such a contradiction, and so I will again say of it simply, “no comment.”

Now you may think that I am evading my responsibility declining to comment on these texts, and perhaps two wrongs don’t make a right, but I will say in my defense that “no comment” is generally the response these texts evoke. We evade them. We ignore them. We avoid them. We don’t comment on them. They are simply too difficult. Instead, we comment easy texts, texts like – “For God so loved the world that he gave his only son” or “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

But in truth, the difficult and easy texts sit side by side together in the Bible and if we find no way to come to terms with this fact other than to pick and choose, easy over difficult, we find ourselves unable to come to terms with our own Bible and unable to defend it from the prevailing impression that the difficult texts discredit it, so it must be abandoned for something more compatible with the advances in our understanding.

And so, what *of* these difficult texts and others like them? At the start, it must be acknowledged that the Bible is, from stem to stern, *frank* in its depiction of the human situation. It is unflinchingly frank. It is unfailingly frank. This is because the Bible discerns that nothing can be learned of the human situation, nothing that is true anyway,

if we do not confront the human situation frankly. The Bible, despite impressions, was not written for polite society. The Bible was written for those who are willing to be confronted by reality in all its fullness, and reality in his fullness has bad manners.

And add to the fact that the Bible is frank in its depiction of the human situation the fact that the Bible did not drop from heaven, every word the timeless and inerrant truth. *It is rather the very human attempt to make faithful witness to God in history.* And as such it struggles to make that faithful witness. In fact, the Bible even argues with itself, protests itself, subverts itself, refutes itself, and it lets the whole struggle stand within its pages. This is how faithful witness to God in history is made in the Bible – not neatly, not evenly, often times not even clearly, but in a crucible of struggle. We learn from the Bible then not line by line, or verse by verse, but out of its struggle to make faithful witness to God in history.

Is suffering punishment for sin, as was taught in the book of Deuteronomy? “No, the book of Job proclaims, “It is not!” And so we hear in the book of Job faithful witness to God in history and learn that we must not add to the burden of those suffering by adding to their suffering our blameful judgments.

Are the most righteous those who have set themselves apart from mainstream society to maintain personal purity, as was taught in the book of Ezra? “No!” the book of Esther proclaims, “They are not!” And so we hear in the book of Esther faithful witness to God

in history and learn we must be out in the world, sullyng our personal purity if needs must, for sake of engagement with the world.

Does God's election of a people mean that those people are superior to other peoples, as was the impression of Israel throughout nearly the whole of its history? "No!" the book of Ruth proclaims, "It does not." And so we hear in the book of Ruth faithful witness to God in history and learn that there are righteous people among all peoples and election is always and only election for service to all peoples in the spirit of justice and love.

And that brings us to the biblical account of David. Is it appropriate to idealize any man, even a great man? "No," declares the account of David, "It is not." And so we hear in the account of David faithful witness to God in history and learn that great men, though they are great men, can and do grow corrupt, so corrupt that they cannot live their corruption down. David did not his. After he saw to the murder of Uriah, his reign was something to be lived out, tarnished by intrigue, disloyalty, and rebellion.

But at the same time, though we must not idealize any man, we may yet acknowledge the greatness that was within him. To allow his corruption to define him is as much in error as is to idealize him. Both David's greatness and his corruption must be interred together with his bones. And so we learn too how we must take stock of the human situation. It is not as our society would have us, as hypocrites for whom the downfall of others is our meat and drink. It is rather with pathos and understanding and sympathy and forgiveness, for the same blood runs in all our veins.

And that brings us to the biblical account of Paul. Is it right that the voice of women or the voice of any Christian be silenced within the church? “No,” declare his epistles overall, “It is not.” Paul’s teaching in Timothy does not over throw his teaching in Galatians. His teaching in Galatians laid a cornerstone of Christian theology, and his teaching in Timothy is but an incongruent pebble within its edifice.

Because in Galatians Paul glimpsed the truth, the truth that the church renders all people within it equal through Jesus Christ. In the church there are no longer to be distinctions of any kind. This in fact is what offers proof that the church *is* the church. Where you find a church fractured by divisions -- divisions of race, orientation, gender, nationality, age -- that is not the Body of Christ. It is the Body of Adam.

And Paul glimpsed that truth. But, too, particularly having spent the long years of his maturity dealing with the realities of forging the church, the glimpse faded. He who in his youth had written, “Now is the appointed time” came to feel the appointed time had come too soon. Yes, he glimpsed the truth but to glimpse the truth and to enact the truth are two different things. And so we learn just how difficult it is the enact the truth -- to overcome our divisions, to allow ourselves to be taught by those we have esteemed to be less than ourselves, and to cope with the resultant upset to our status quo.

The Bible struggled throughout its 2,000 year history to give faithful witness to God in history. It struggled, and it never gave up the fight. This is why Paul could claim rightly

just before his martyrdom that he had fought the good fight. He had. To fight the good fight in the Bible is never to give up the struggle to make faithful witness to God in history. That struggle now passes to us. Will we in that struggle falter? Will we lapse? Will we sin? Yes, and yes again. But we will not fail, because it is in our struggle to make witness to God in history that God by his providence and design will continue to make himself known in history. Amen.