***Beggar Prince at the King’s Table***

*a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno in August 11, 2024*

*based on 2 Samuel 9:1-8*

I’ve preached a few sermons on King David this summer. Bunny Oliver preached one, too. Stories about him fill the summer lectionary every three years, however, this summer I’ve had us look at a few stories from the life of David that the lectionary skips over – the story about Abigail, and the one last week about Uzzah, the unlucky.

Three summers ago I gave you my analysis of the famous story where he takes another man’s wife for his own. That man was one of David’s generals, Uriah the Hittite. The wife of Uriah was Bathsheba. Well, you may remember that Bathsheba became pregnant with David’s child. That’s when things got interesting, One thing led to another, as often happens with shady dealings. Well, it led to a murder. David, you may remember, had Uriah killed in battle. Really slimy.

Well, what happens next is left out of the lectionary but I find it too interesting to ignore.

The child of this union is born, and right away the question is, will it survive? The poor little guy just doesn’t look right. I want to open this sermon by picking up the details of that story right there …

David prays desperately to God for the little boy. He fasts. He refuses to do press conferences. He stops making public appearances. He sleeps on the floor. The elders in the court and members of his family are summoned. They try to get him off the floor, but he won’t budge. Nor can they get him to eat a single thing.

On the seventh day the child dies. David’s servants are afraid to tell him. They say, “What should we do? While there was hope the child might live he wouldn’t listen to a word we said. Now, there’s no telling what he might do.” Here’s the account ….

*David noticed that the servants were whispering behind his back, and realized that the boy must have died.*

*He asked the servants, “Is the boy dead?”*

*“Yes,” they answered. “He’s dead.”*

*David got up from the floor, washed his face, combed his hair, put on a fresh change of clothes, then went into the sanctuary and worshiped. Then he came home and asked for something to eat. They gave him pot roast with carrots and yellow onions and he ate it like a starving man.*

*His servants asked him, “What’s going on with you? While the child was alive you fasted and wept and stayed up all night. Now that he’s dead, you get up and eat.”*

*“While the child was alive,” he said, “I fasted and wept, thinking God might have mercy on me and the child would live. But now that he’s dead, why should I fast?*

*Can I bring him back?*

I want to begin with that story because it is indicative of the peculiar character of David. He’s a murderer, yes, and yet he is so human in positive ways, too. He is very much his own man, and he’s also very transparent. In some ways one might say he is somewhat Godly, but it’s still clear that he has to be watched every moment.

Like you, I imagine, I have this soft spot in my heart for individuals who are their own person – who speak truth even when it doesn’t serve them.

This election season I find myself missing John McCain. I will never forget that town hall when he was running for president in 2008 and a woman stood up and repeated some nonsense she’d heard on FOX News. She said, “We know Barack Obama is an Arab.” John McCain didn’t hesitate. He said, “No ma’am. He’s not. He’s a decent family man, a citizen of the USA that I just happen to have disagreements with on fundamental issues.”

As we all know now from recent history, it might have helped him to agree with that deluded woman, but John McCain, God bless him, was not willing to sell his soul, nor base his presidential campaign on a lie. That’s integrity.

Now let’s go back in time a bit in the saga of King David to this morning’s text. It’s a story from the early years of David’s reign – the story of Mephibosheth.

Mephibosheth was only five years old when news came that his father, Jonathan, and his grandfather, King Saul, had both been killed in battle. Terrified that the child might be next, his nurse snatches him up in her arms and starts to run off to hide him somewhere.

He’s the heir apparent and everyone knows you have to protect the prince. Well, she was in such a panic, she tripped and fell and the boy was badly crippled, so badly that he never walked normally again.

Well, David, a powerful warlord, steps into the gap caused by the deaths of the boy’s grandfather, Saul, and his father, Jonathan, and, you know, the first thing a new king usually does is consolidate his power and make sure that any surviving claimants to the throne are taken care of, one way or another; often permanently.

I mean, it was standard procedure to wipe out your predecessor's entire family when you came to the throne, just in case any of them happened to have political ambitions.

But maybe because Mephibosheth was compromised in the mobility department, or maybe because his father, Jonathan, had once been David's best friend, or maybe because of a combination of these things, David decides to be generous. David, let’s face it, is a complex individual.

In fact, treating Mephibosheth with maximum grace and favor is just the kind of crazy, magnificent gesture David likes to make every once in a while -- like the time a few of his soldiers risked their necks, breaking through enemy lines to bring him a cup of cool water from Bethlehem, his hometown, and David won the hearts of everybody by saying, "Shall I drink the blood of you men who gathered this flagon of water at the risk of your own lives?" (2 Samuel 23:15-17), and he poured the water out on the ground.

Anyway, he had his servants bring Mephibosheth before him, and the poor 5 year old fell on his face in terror, sure that this meant his execution, but David told him not to be afraid.

Dvid told him that he, Mephibosheth, was to have all the property that rightfully belonged to him, property that had been his father’s and grandfather’s. Yes, and a man named Ziba, a servant, would look after him. And he also promised him that from then on he was to take all his meals at the king's table as if he was David’s own son … It was quite a moment.

Now, you can’t underestimate the significance of this gesture. I mean, first, this is a clear way for David to keep an eye on the young man who will continue to have a legitimate claim to the throne. But it will also mean that Mephibosheth will never be a stranger to the king, which may explain David’s behavior later.

Here’s what I mean. Remember, Ziba, the servant? Well he is a sly one as it turns out, and years later when there was a revolt against David, perpetrated by David’s own son, Absalom, Ziba would tell David that Mephibosheth had defected to the other side. He claimed he had become a rebel like Absalom.

Now, what motivated Ziba was the hope that David would grant him not only his favor, but also cede him all of Mephibosheth's real estate, and so David, without first ordering a thorough investigation, gives Ziba everything that belongs to Mephibosheth. Everything.

Weird. That David would do such a thing is totally uncharacteristic of him. David is a wise and discerning king. If any king of Israel knew when he was being played, well, it was David. But let’s not forget that this happens in the direct aftermath of his being betrayed by his favorite son, Absalom, and also hearing that Absalom had been killed.

What I am saying here is that David is a mess emotionally.

Next thing that happens -- Mephibosheth shows up and makes an eloquent case to David that Ziba, his servant, has been lying. In fact, Mephibosheth shows up with his beard untrimmed and hair in a royal tangle, saying that he had been so anxious about King David’s safety during the revolt that he was frozen in place and could not flee with the king to a place of safety. He couldn’t even comb his hair.

He had been on the king’s side all along, he says, and David doesn’t quite know who to believe.

Poor David is so shattered by everything that has happened that he can't give the matter his full attention let alone his genius for things political. So he tells Mephibosheth that he is rescinding his original order and that he and Ziba can just divide the real estate between them, fifty-fifty.

What is clear here is that David, the great king, the man of sound judgment, is compromised. He is only hitting on one or two cylinders, at best. Though he can’t *not* be king, (he still has to pronounce judgments) he would actually like the whole world to just go away.

Maybe you know what that feels like. In fact, I bet you do.

Most days you and I are ready and able to deal with life as it comes to us. Even in a pinch, even when something comes out of left field, we can summon up our best, or our next to best. But there are times when that’s just not possible. Because of an illness, or a trauma or who knows what, and we become like little children when it comes to making a judgment about something important.

Well, before David has a chance to leave, Mephibosheth says that he is overjoyed that David had driven the rebels out and come through the battle safe and sound, and that to celebrate he is prepared to let Ziba, his old conniving servant, have the whole thousand acres that once belonged to him and the ranch house, too.

Now, whether or not he made good on that offer, or even intended to, hardly matters. It was a crazy and magnificent gesture to make, and one wonders if David was maybe just too lost in his own grief to realize, however dimly, what a remarkable young man Mephibosheth must have been. (2 Samuel 19:24-30)

Or … I wonder if, maybe it ***wasn’t*** the trauma. Maybe David had just reached the age when he no longer felt he had to control everything or even could. Maybe he no longer trusted he was always the guy in the room with the best ideas. That can happen, especially when your own son has turned on you.

Maybe he had come to accept the complexities of life, that the world changes and you just aren’t going to understand everything forever.

Think of Joe Biden. He pulled-off the prisoner exchange he’d been working on for months involving 7 or was it 8 countries, but had to finally accept that he was too old and that for his party to have any chance at all in November he needed to step aside.

You know, the Bible doesn’t tell us who was telling the truth that day in old Jerusalem – Ziba or Mephibosheth. We never find out.

We don’t know anything at all about Ziba. And though we have Mephibosheth’s backstory, we just don’t have full entry into his heart either; the Biblical narrator just gives us the young man’s verbal account and a picture of the state of his apparent lack of hygiene.

We know that when he was very tiny he lost a father and a grandfather on the same day. We know that on that same day he also became crippled for life. We know that had it not been for David’s generosity, he would be dead, and we know he knows this, too.

There he sat, two or three times a day, eating at the table of a man who benefitted mightily from his personal losses. Sitting there with the man himself. What might that do to a young person?

He is a bit of an enigma, this crippled prince who was raised to expect more from life – a lot more. What must old David have made of him?

Fact is, we all live in our own little bubbles, don’t we? And we should always be humble about what we think we know or don’t know about other people. The health of our relationships depends on this -- how we manage in our places of work, or in our families.

So, let me close by sharing a poem with you that is dear to me. It’s about another enigma; a woman who thought it best to allow a baby she was carrying be adopted and raised by someone else. It’s as strong a wake-up call as I know about the mystery other people always are and how it is always best to respect that mystery.

***FOR MY HUSBAND’S BIRTH MOTHER by Ellen Bass***

Those months I carried [our daughter] Sarah

I’d think of your birth mother,

The woman who carried you

Though she could not

keep you.

This woman

We did not know, this girl

Whose life was changed

In ways we’ll never know

Who wanted or did not want

Who loved or did not love

Who chose or did not choose

But, willing or reluctant

Carried you. . . Birthed you.

We do not know her name

Or what she thought as her

fingertips soaped her taut

Belly in the bath,

As your kicks reached her

First uncertain, then

Definite, firm rabbit thumps.

We do not know if she could

Keep food down, if

Her legs cramped,

If she grew dizzy in the grocery

Had to drop her head between her knees

To keep from blacking out.

We do not know if she held you in her hospital bed,

If her breasts were bound to keep the milk from

Letting down

Or if they drugged her and she woke

Only to the new softness of her belly, like dough.

We do not know

What friends or family criticized her, if they

Sent her out of town and brought her back

As though she’d been on holiday.

We know only

There was a woman who gave you

The food of her blood

The bed of her flesh,

Who breathed for you.

We do not know

If anyone ever thanked her.

Amen.