

Sanctuary: More than a Hiding Place

sermon digest

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I Samuel 21:1-9

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Sanctuary, defined as a place of safety and security or refuge, is as critical a concept today as it has ever been. We need only turn on the evening news or read the morning paper about former residents of Syria now on the run from Hafez al-Assad; or the case of children and some adults on the run from the horrendous gang violence in central American countries like Honduras, Venezuela, and Columbia many of whom which have fled to our borders seeking the opportunity for a new start. Ask girls and women from African countries who have faced beatings, rape, and escaped to refugee camps, only to find the behavior of those guarding the camps to be no better. Sanctuary is a critical need in our time. The need for sanctuary, isn't a new one, it has been around for a long time. David, the son of Jesse and former shepherd boy knew well the need for sanctuary as he witnessed the deterioration of the mental health of his boss, King Saul. Having once been a source of great relief to the king, playing the lyre to soothe Saul's nerves and calm his spirit, and having faithfully served in his military, he has become to Saul a source of great jealousy and raging anger, and Saul will settle for nothing less, now, than the death of this one who has served him faithfully over time. It's a tragic story. Once, Saul had been a man who meticulously sought to obey the will of God, now, he's obsessed with keeping his power over others come what may.

David is on the run, as we meet up with him in today's narrative, because Saul recently had tried to pin David to wall with his spear. David knows there's no turning back the clock to a better day with King Saul. Saul's intent to murder him has congealed into a hard, fixed purpose.

Where could he go to get away from Saul? The answer would be, two-fold in the David narrative. First, he would go to Samuel and a band of prophets and later to the place we heard of moments ago, the sanctuary at Nob, which was presided over by the priest Ahimelech, son of Ahitub, who was the grandson of Eli. Nob had become a place where remnants of the priestly line of Eli settled after the destruction of Shiloh and loss of the ark of the Covenant. At the sanctuary, David, long ago anointed by Samuel to be the next king over Israel, will find what he has been seeking: a place of safety, and a place with everything he needs to equip him and sustain him for life.

David comes to the sanctuary hungry, disheveled, vulnerable, aware of his need. He leaves restored, thanks to a priest who responds to David's need with an open mind and a spirit of graciousness. When David asks for bread, he has no common bread to give him, so he offers him the shew bread, normally reserved for priests alone to eat after it's been used for worship. He makes an exception for David having been told of his being on mission for a king, and hearing that David and the soldiers he says are with him have stayed ritually pure, he shares it with him. He also gives David the sword that hung in the holy place as a constant reminder of God's deliverance of Israel from the Philistines through the defeat of mighty Goliath. David was said to have need of it and he having no other sword to give David, gives this to him. If Doeg's report is to be believed, that he gives to the king, and there's no reason not to believe, he also sought a message of guidance, an oracle from the priest and again Ahimelech appears to have obliged this request. Fed, supplied, and renewed in understanding he's anointed of God to be Israel's next king, David will move from the sanctuary at Nob, back into the risky world, but equipped with everything he needed to move toward his sacred destiny.

David's choice of where to run, when on the run, was not merely to a safe place; he knows it to be more than that, it is a holy place. It's likely it was not just in a crisis that David ran to such a place. He had encountered the Holy God while shepherding his father's flock, he has likely worshipped with his family growing up, and I'm guessing his music he played on the lyre was from music he heard at worship. He likely chooses to go to Nob because he was not unfamiliar with the welcome and acceptance that is characteristic of holy sites and in holy communities. Eugene H. Peterson writes in *Leap Over A Wall: Earthy Spirituality for Everyday Christians* that "David is well launched by now into a life of holiness—a life defined and initiated by God. But he's also being assaulted by its opposite." (Peterson, p. 61). He comes to the sanctuary not just with physical needs but with a need of divine re-set...(reset life will restore him not just with energy for survival, but with a vision of what lay ahead for him, and a renewed understanding of the sacred context of his life).

This is not to say that David's behavior at Nob is exemplary, he is no paragon of virtue here. The writer tells this story about David honestly showing us David is human and imperfect, but also showing

us that that David is eager for God to bless his renegade endeavors...Here and elsewhere in the Davidic narrative, we'll learn of David's scheming ways, of his adultery, and even his responsibility for murder. Still, he arrives at Nob, knowing God wanted him to survive Saul's attacks and, when the time was right, to become the next king of Israel. David's flaw is to be willing to help God's purposes along even if it took a lie here and there to help that happen. It was a flaw that would cost Ahimelech, the dedicated servant of God, his life. It would also claim the lives of 84 other priests and lead to a ban being exacted on the whole land of Nob.

Lest, we lose focus here. ***The point of the David narratives is that while Saul's popularity diminishes and he loses the support of God's servants, the prophets and the priests, what's significant here is not that we are to look at David's behavior and imitate it; rather, it's to know that God is our sustenance and the center of our being.*** In times when life has us down and discouraged, tired, curious or when we're feeling uprooted and without stability and security wondering how God might possibly be at work in the midst of our loss and tragedy, God is still our refuge and strength and present help in our time of trouble. For our part, we have to receive the presence of God and the aid of God that God is seeking to provide.

People we admire most tend to be those who faced adversity with the hope of God that came from knowing God to be the security, the safe place, the holy anchor in the midst of life's storms. I recall church member and friend Bob Rice dying and Vera, his wife, encouraging us to sing in what we knew to be Bob's waning moments of life. We sang the words to "It is Well with My Soul" as we stood by his hospital bed. We admire those who respond to hate with love, to dying with peace and hope, to the transitions of life with a courage born of the God to whom we're called to turn to for our security.

Earlier I spoke of the need for sanctuary in our world primarily talking about situations where safety and hiding, at least for a time, can take place. **In the biblical narrative sanctuary is a place where so much more can happen than physical protection and provision. It is a place where you can encounter the One who is "wholly Other."** The One who can't be limited to our imaginations or even to the best we can imagine. The One whom, again to use Peterson's words, is "Mystery," and who can't be studied empirically the way we scrupulously examine evidence in a laboratory." So, dear friends, to predict what God will do, or to attempt to get God under our control in any way" will be an exercise in futility. ..Our only appropriate approach to God is in awe and reverence, in humble and submissive worship. While we're attracted to what we can apprehend of God-goodness, truth, beauty, love-we're also apprehensive of what lies beyond our grasp, aware that the writer of Hebrews is onto something when he declares "it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God." (Heb. 10:31; 12:25-29)."

Sanctuary is a place for paying attention to the holy God. Whether it's in a physical location, or a place in our heart, sanctuary is critical if our life is to be anchored firmly in faith and if we are to live with joy and meaning, and if we are going to share the gifts of God with the world around us. We call this place sanctuary. Coming here week after week, or twice a week, sometimes more, in times like Holy Week, we come to a place where the truth of God is sought and honored, and to remember ways God has been active and powerful through hearing words about the One who is Holy, offering songs of praise and devotion; singing, praying, articulating, meditating, reflecting, listening for and encountering holy truth, & experiencing sacred community entering limping, leaving encouraged, restored, somehow more hopeful, sometimes leaving with more questions than answers, but always in the process of being made new. We come here and find ourselves sustained for the routine situations of life, and carried through the crises.

Like David, we don't leave perfect, but we can leave the sanctuary with our calling renewed to shine as a city on a hill, and to be a people who offer sanctuary. David will be reminded through his time with Ahimelech at Nob, that God's provision is what he most needs is to live life in "a God-shaped context" which will not be deterred by a madman of a king seeking his life, nor anyone else. It's a place for remembering whose we are and to listen for ways God speaks to us so that we might become all we're meant to be. Without sanctuary, we're in danger of becoming cheap replications of what we're meant to be and far less beautiful than we were made to be.

I love a story Scott Walker uses in his book, *Glimpses of God: Stories that Point the Way*. Story of a painting he rescued from the corner of musty, old antique shop. Seeing its carved and gilded

molding, he guessed it to be of nineteenth-century workmanship. As he moved closer to examine it, he would see drab and muted colors, and a canvas turned dark with age. Images were hidden by layers of dirt, smoke, and grime. Seeing the outline of a few trees, and the fading pattern of a skyline it knew it to be a landscape, but that was about all. He inquired about it from the antique shop owner who confessed he had only bought it for the frame and told Scott what he knew about the painting. He bought it an estate auction some years ago in Georgia. It was an oil painting and it had been in a farm house hanging over the fire place. Years of soot and smoke covered it up. After this he told Scott he'd sell it to him for the cost of the frame, \$100.00. Knowing this could be a bargain, he also knew it would have to be cleaned and professionally restored and then might still not be worth much. He studied the painting some more outside and eventually bought it.

He then took it to his friend the restorationist after deciding to pay the \$200.00 extra to have it cleaned and restored. While he didn't have a masterpiece on his hands he did have a beautiful landscape at sunset. The colors were subdued, yet beautiful. The man in the English punt wore a straw boater hat, white shirt, and vest—he was dressed in Victorian style. In the background was a stucco English cottage with a thatched roof which wasn't visible before the painting was cleaned. Scott says the painting hanging in his living room and him have become friends.

By keeping room in our lives for sanctuary, we can keep life from distorting our God-intended uniqueness...Like the effects of the chemicals on Scott's paintings that cleaned it up, and the relining and restretching of the canvas and the removal of the old lacquer finish, on the painting, our holy God keeps our lives in line with its sacred design when we prioritize time and space in our lives for worshiping the holy, leaving room for sanctuary. I'd like to leave the story there neatly tied up in a bow and to be opened when needed.

We can't leave this text without recognizing that living life in a "God-shaped," "God-sized" context isn't a foregone conclusion that automatically happens by coming to this place of sanctuary. One need only witness Doeg's actions in this story to know this is the case. Doeg, who is called the "chief of Saul's shepherds" but really is more like the head of Saul's secret police, happens to engaged in some type of religious activity in the sanctuary—perhaps in a ritual of penance or purification—and winds up using his observations of David's activities there in seeking to gain political advantage. He is not interested in "the things of God" this Edomite, classic enemies of Israel always viewed by Israelites with suspicion in the biblical narrative, but only how to use religion for his own gain. He is not looking to intensify his faith at the sanctuary, but to add to his own sense of self-righteousness. To him the sanctuary wasn't holy. When Saul's own tribal soldiers from Gibeah refused to go along with his orders to kill the priests of the Lord, Doeg gladly steps forward and not only kills 85 priests (Abiathar alone escapes) but he also declares a ban on the city of Nob and wipes out the entire village—men, women, children, and animals included.

Doeg wasn't changed at the sanctuary, his heart wasn't open to it. We can use sanctuary to cultivate our sense of superiority, to justify hatred, and to further our own meanness. We can use it to sanction our own callous, cold, and conniving ways of living and expect others to go along.

God continues to offer sanctuary to our world the question is, "Are we receiving what God has to offer and then pointing others by our living and our bold and steady stances to do the same?" AMEN.