

Sermon by Ted Mosebach
First Congregational Church
United Church of Christ
East Hartford, Connecticut

June 17, 2012

I Samuel 15:34 -16:13 (and reference to preceding chapters)

In Over Our Heads

The anointing of David to be the second King of Israel was similar to the anointing of Saul to be the first King of Israel. Both times it was God who did the choosing and then the prophet Samuel revealed God's choice. On each occasion the one chosen did not seek the job although each man initially showed great promise for it. But despite the many talents and abilities that each man had, both Saul and David would ultimately prove to be in over their heads as kings without the help of God and the guidance of God's commandments.

When Samuel told Saul that he was selected by God to be the first King of Israel Saul replied that he was only a Benjaminite, which was the least of the tribes of Israel. Then Saul added that his family was the least of the families of Benjamin but that doesn't seem to be true. We are told at the beginning of the story that his family was very wealthy. It may be that Saul was not an ambitious young man and by saying that his family was not important he was suggesting that his selection was a mistake. It does seem that Saul did at least one other thing to avoid becoming king. When Samuel gathered all the people of Israel together for the formal ceremony of choosing lots to see who would become king and Saul's lot was chosen, some people were sent to get him but he could not be found. He was hiding among the baggage which the tribe brought along with it to the selecting ceremony.

Isn't this quite the scene, really, as we might imagine it? Here is this very tall young man (for we are told that when he finally appeared before the assembly he stood head and shoulders above everyone else), here is this very tall young man trying to scrunch among the baggage so as to hide in an apparent attempt to avoid becoming king. We might imagine the scene when he is found— *Come on, Saul, come on! You've been chosen king! Everyone wants to see you!* Did his retrievers need to pull him and push him forward? Might it have been a 'Li'l Abner" type of scene like the one in which Abner's small mother pulls her great big son around by the ear?

Today the idea of a shy, reluctant politician might be almost inconceivable for us. We are more accustomed to our would be leaders not only volunteering for the job but spending extraordinary amounts of time and energy and money in order to be chosen; rather than seeking to evade public notice, their attraction to cameras being something like that of moths to the light.

Although it seems clear that Saul began his rule as a rather reluctant humble King the privileges of power, as the term now has it, are heady indeed, and a few decades into his reign Saul began to feel not only competent in his position but completely self-reliant. He seems to have forgotten about his being chosen ultimately by God and how God had given him the military victories when it was a just cause for the sake of all the people of Israel. So when Saul stopped depending upon God, when Saul began to conquer his enemies for the sake of the spoils, when he began to make decisions according to what was best for his own political advantage instead of what was best for the purposes of justice, then God withdrew God's Spirit from Saul and gave it to David.

Personally, I find myself feeling sorry for Saul. He feels more like tragic figure to me than an evil one. He doesn't seem to be such a bad guy but one maybe in over his head, perhaps in that way like all the rest of us; in over our heads in life, unable without the guidance of Christian principles and acknowledgement of the help of God to live successfully. I wonder that if we too are not careful, and we have some success, so that we think we can have more of whatever we want and when we want it, that then we might not think so much about other people and other values. Maybe we even come to think we have a right to whatever we want, because we did the work, and we took the risks. And then we might start to take the biggest risks of all, the ones with our scruples, and maybe we even set them aside for awhile thinking that we can manage it. We may think we can protect ourselves from any damage because, after all, look at everything else we've been able to do, and so we don't always do as the proverb says.

Trust in the Lord with all our hearts and lean not unto our own understanding, in all our ways acknowledge him and he shall direct our paths (Proverbs 3:5),

And consequently our lives suffer a crack here and a crumble there if they do not come completely undone, because we're in over our heads. Isn't that just the plain and simple truth of it, without the guidance of Christian teaching, without the help of God, we're all in way over our heads?

It is a marvelous image, the one of the impetuous, passionate, good Peter walking off the boat unto the water out there during a storm on the Sea of Galilee so that he could be with Jesus. But then Peter looked around him and started to sink. Remember that? What a great story! There was Peter looking out at Jesus from the boat and saying, "Lord, if it is you tell me to come to you on the water." And Jesus says, "Come!" And so Peter filled with excitement and we might surely assume faith starts out toward Jesus. But then, as if the situation suddenly dawns upon him, Peter notices the storm and the waves and then starts to go down, because on his own Peter couldn't walk on the water. The path across the stormy water was too treacherous by far for Peter to negotiate by himself. He didn't have nearly what he needed to do such a thing. Left to only his own resources he sank. And we don't know how far down Peter had sunk when Jesus got to Peter and drew him out of the water, the story doesn't say. But we might know this, that when Peter was walking on the open water in a storm and he took his eyes off Jesus he was in way over his head already whether the water ever came up over his ears or not. (Matthew 14:22-33)

Some time ago when we lived just outside of Philadelphia, and I would have reason upon occasion to go downtown to an event at our Old First Reformed Church at Fourth and Race Streets, I spoke with a woman there who was doing some short term mission work at the church, helping in the overnight shelter and food pantry and some other outreach services that we have at Old First. I learned that the woman came from a rural community and I asked what she thought of the city by contrast to where she lived. She thought for moment and then said, *everything is so available here!* That response got my attention. It was one of those occasions when something that is said rings so true that it might stick with us and shape our perspective on things for the rest of our lives. Indeed, in the big city, everything *is* available, but not everything is good for us, and we must pick and choose. But here's the thing, and I think, really, this is the thing— it's not just in the big city, is it? Maybe there are more choices in the big city, but surely that is not the only place where we must choose wisely, where more is available than what is good for us. Considering all our conflicting impulses and wants and needs and desires, it's not just if we are a king, and it's not just in the big city when we're in over our heads.

For many years following the Monica Lewinsky scandal of the Clinton Presidency, questions continued to be raised to the former President of why it was that he risked his entire presidency on such an affair. Why did he do it, with all that was at stake? And for all the dodges and half answers and everything he said about it, the question would never go away, until during an interview with someone and I can not remember now with whom it was, but the question of "why" came to the President yet once more, and he didn't seem to punt it this time, nor weave some sort of avoidance pattern. This time, to the question of "Why, Mr. President, why did you do it?" he answered quite simply, "Because I could." Indeed. It was, in its simplicity, the most profound of all understandings. It wasn't an excuse, goodness no, not an excuse, but the answer which was finally understandable, which would begin to put the question to rest, the one which might be both the most revealing and at the same time the most frightening of all answers because perhaps we instinctively knew all along that it was the reason, because that circumstance is the one in which all of us are always the most vulnerable to doing the wrong thing, because we can.

If as we liked to repeat as a sort of self-righteous youth mantra back in the sixties, "Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely (Acton)," then King Saul might be the poster boy for it. And so in our scripture reading this morning we learn that the Spirit of God was taken from Saul and given to David, an eighth son, the one who was sent out to the fields to watch the sheep, the one way down on the family totem pole who would need to come up the hard way, he would be given the Spirit of God and the power to be king that came with it. But do we think that therefore David would not be corrupted by it, that David would be different? Do we think that David would not abuse his power? Do we think that because David experienced personally what it was to be powerless that he would always remember under whose authority he ruled and therefore he would never abuse the authority he had over others? Are you kidding me? Ask Bathsheba. Ask her husband Uriah, a soldier whom David sent to the place of battle where he knew Uriah

would be killed, all so that David could have Bathsheba unencumbered by the inconvenience that she had a living husband! David, David, why? You had a thousand wives! Did you need Bathsheba too, just because you could have her? Is there no one in Israel who might remember the guidance and love of God, knowing that without them any King or Queen or simple man or woman is in over his or her head?

I once heard Joe Namath tell a story that happened just after the New York Jets won the third Super Bowl, for which team he was the quarterback. He was at that moment at the height of his success, and he was feeling strong and victorious. As he was about to leave the field immediately following the game, a fan leaned over the railing at the exit ramp which led into the locker rooms. The fan yelled to him, *Hey, Joe! Remember the Lord!* It was years afterward that I heard Namath recount that story and he said that he has since tried to do that, to remember the Lord, and he hoped he always would. I hope so, too, Joe. I hope we all do.