

July 1, 2018
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2 Samuel 1:1, 17-27

This is Our Song

Na na na na, Na na na na, Hey hey hey, Goodbye! Did World Cup watchers sing that for Germany last week? Or Argentina? I don't know any more of the song than that, the refrain, and I only know it because it's often sung at the end of sports competitions, sometimes even before the game is over, when the game is over for one side, when the winning team really wants to rub it in, when they want to taunt their rivals, then they sing this refrain: Na, na na na....

There's a refrain in the first reading today, too, a song that has similarities to that one. The one from the Bible is a song of David, who was known to be a strong competitor as well as musically talented. In other parts of the Bible it says that David played the harp, and many of the psalms of the Bible—which are songs, psalm means song—many of the psalms are attributed to David. So also is the song that is today's first reading, from the book of II Samuel. We're in book two now, moving along in our summer series focusing on Israel's first kings. The ancient song found at the beginning of II Samuel even has notes from the composer: that part it being The Song of The Bow, and The Book of Jashar. That line stuck out for me. I think it stuck out to Biblical editors, too, because they stuck it in parentheses, the directions, the cues, kind of like the cue I gave at the beginning of this sermon. And like that song, this one in the Bible occurs at the end of a competition, and its refrain could almost sound like a taunt, "How the mighty have fallen!" but it's not. The Song of the Bow is not a song of sore winners, it is a song of lament.

David sings in lament for Saul, once King Saul, now dead on the field of battle. Saul and David were rivals for the throne of Israel, but they were much more than that, too. In times past David used to play his harp for Saul, soothe Saul when his spirit was troubled; music can do that, be a balm. I thought about Saul and David's relationship in yet another way after last Sunday, when we had congregational members do a dramatic reading of what is perhaps the most famous David story of all: when David slew Goliath. Last Sunday Goliath was memorably sized, standing up on the organ, but the relationship between David and Goliath had more subtle implications. We had thirteen year old Ryne Petersen read the part of David, and he was fittingly fresh-faced, as it says of the Biblical David, and he also has beautiful eyes. And then we had Ryne's father, Greg Petersen, read the part of Saul. This felt fitting too, too, in that it conveyed something of the closeness, and the complexity, of the relationship between David and Saul, close and complex as father-son relationships are. And so also I thought it also made it all the more poignant to see Saul not wanting to send him, who was "just a boy" off to battle. If he must go, then Saul wanted to give him his armor. But the boy didn't want it. And then Saul's last words to him were, "Go, and may the Lord be with you."

And David went off to battle, and the Lord was with him. Last week it was Goliath that David faced; there were many more battles after that, stories we've skipped in the chapters between last week's reading and this one today, including conflicts between Saul and David. We've skipped Saul's increasingly troubled mind, his anxiety and paranoia, even madness, we've skipped many disturbing scenes, including several in which Saul tries to kill David, but David eludes him. David himself has opportunities to kill Saul, but David does not do so, even though Saul is out to kill him.

And then Saul dies on the field of battle. Saul dies, together with Saul's biological son, Jonathan, who was David's dear friend. David hears that his rivals to the throne have been defeated, but David does not celebrate, he mourns, his refrain is in a minor key. "How the

mighty have fallen!” “Tell it not in Gath,” David sings, “proclaim it not in the streets of Ashkelon,” Don’t celebrate, people, not even you, nature, “Let there be no rain, let the fields be barren.” Lament for a world such as this, battle-worn and bitterly divided, lament for what was beautiful, lost. “Saul and Jonathan, beloved and lovely! Swifter than eagles, stronger than lions.” Ambrose, a 4th century leader of the church, who, as it happens, is known for his contributions to church music, Ambrose wrote of this passage, “What mother could weep thus for her only son as he wept here for his enemy? Who could follow his benefactor with such praise as that with which he followed the man who plotted against his life?”

How different this Song of the Bow is from so many we hear today—if we can even call them songs—the chants, the taunts, the disparaging of rivals, the attacks on opponents, the inhumane ways other people are treated because they are from a different country, or political party. This is what we do now? Repeat belligerent refrains? Chase people out of restaurants? Have we ever been so divided as a nation?

We have. You may remember difficult decades passed that I am not quite old enough to recall. You may have lived through times in which the fabric of this nation seemed ready to be ripped apart: Vietnam. The Battle for Civil Rights. But well before any one of us was born, our nation was almost torn in two, right down the middle. We fought a devastating war about it, the Civil War. We pushed division to the breaking point.

Last week I finally finished reading *Team of Rivals*, Doris Kearns Goodwin’s great biography of Abraham Lincoln. I can hardly fathom how divided the country was, how divided his cabinet was—and how Lincoln continuously rose above it, how continuously, and unselfishly, magnanimously and wisely he quelled the urge to lash back, to seek payback, to be punitive, in matters petty and of momentous consequence. Lincoln was no doormat. He was a warrior. He oversaw battles in which fields were covered with blood, but whenever he could he chose compassion, and he worked tirelessly for unity, that the weapons of war might perish. After he won his second term—an incredible, landslide victory—he gave the most theological of all his speeches, his second inaugural address. Lincoln’s second inaugural is not just a speech, it is a song of lament, a mournful meditation laced with reference to the God of Israel. The address laments the war, but even more than that, it laments the great offense against fellow human beings which caused the war: slavery.

Chains and slurs are still in our midst, we still live in the kingdom of this world, but we do not need to be ruled by it. David ordered that The Song of the Bow be taught to future generations. We come to this place to learn it, and others like it, to hear these stories, to be reminded what greatness, what majesty, is. As earth’s monarchies rise and fall, these are the songs God’s people sing: songs of lament for all victims of violence; songs that mourn suffering and all the ways we inflict it; songs that see one another as beautiful, beloved and lovely; songs that remind us of the one who says, “Love your enemies,” songs of the one who rose, who rose above it all, and who came to take us by the hand, and raise us up, too.