

The Rev. Dean Lindsey

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Promises

Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Ephesians 1:17-23; 2 Samuel 7:1-17

“With great power there must come great responsibility.” Superhero fans will recognize that as a line straight from the Spider Man movies and comic books. A teenaged Peter Parker, possessed of extraordinary abilities, fails to protect his uncle from an attack by street thugs. In lament, he realizes that he must use the power he has for the purposes of good. This sober moment of insight is recorded in the final frame of the very first Spider Man comic book. To it, the author adds a concluding thought. “And so a legend is born and a new name is added to the roster of those who make the world of fantasy the most exciting realm of all!”

We all love a hero. Someone who will take our side. Stand up for what is right. Never falter. We yearn for heroes, though in the real world rather than the fantasy world, when it turns out they have feet made of clay, we are seldom forgiving. My how the mighty fall! Each day the news brings another story of a politician who admits to an extra-marital affair, a business person who’s defrauded the public, a government official who’s taken a bribe, or a sports figure who’s used

performance enhancing drugs. “With great power, there often comes great irresponsibility.”

No doubt, there are complex psychological forces which lead to such misbehavior. We’re often told that politics attracts risk takers, people who have a healthy portion of ego—how else could they put themselves out front as they often do? For the leaders in politics, business, sports, or entertainment there is, of course, the unrelenting drive to succeed and improve and the constant competition from someone else who wants to take their place. And yet, it seems that there is a great temptation among those who reach such heights (and I must include religious leaders, too). To put it simply, they begin to believe their own press releases. They start to think that the adulation they encourage and the praise they receive make for a true, rather than a distorted, incomplete, picture of themselves. They begin to believe the success they enjoy is completely due to their own deserving. It is an attitude that leads them to say, “I am so wonderful that I am above the normal rules. I am so exceptional that I can do no wrong.”

Of course, this is a prescription for disaster, one that seems to be replayed over and over again. We’ve certainly seen it here in Illinois, to the chagrin of us all. But, I am certain such problems rest not only with the leaders who stray but also with the followers: our shared standards and whether we insist upon them, our common expectations and whether these are uniformly communicated, the hopes

that we all have for a common good and whether these are required of our leaders. In other words, do we look for the right qualities in our leaders, or do we lift them up, admire them, become passionate about them for a host of wrong reasons?

Ancient Israel struggled over these issues. How would the people be led? What qualities ought the leaders possess? Some very different answers to these questions find voice in the Old Testament. The first and most enduring answer which Israel proclaims is “Yahweh (the Lord God) is our king!” At an early point in its history, a system of tribal allegiances with the emergence of the occasional strong ruler who unites the people against a common enemy is deemed sufficient. However, Israel changes, and so does its world. In the opening chapters of the Book of Samuel, the people bring their petitions to God and to the prophet Samuel. They want to have a king so that they “may be like other nations.” However, Samuel (and God it would seem) offer grudging assent and a word of warning. “These will be the ways of the king who reigns over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots . . . He will take your daughters . . . he will take the best of your fields . . . he will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards, and the best of your flocks. And in that day you will cry out because of your king whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the Lord will not answer you in that day” (1 Sam 8:11-18, *passim*).

These words speak from the old Yahwist theology which persists through subsequent Jewish history. It is a theology always suspicious of the concentration of power and concerned about the exploitive tendencies of a centralized government. When Israel's leaders are unfaithful, there is always a small "I told you so!" being whispered in the background.

The reign of David, however, sees the full emergence of a completely different orientation. Scholars call it the Royal theology or Jerusalem theology. Yahweh's presence among the people will be mediated by a human king. Indeed, the future safety and blessing of the people of God will be assured by God's covenant to create a perpetual dynasty led by King David and his descendants. "I will not take my steadfast love from him," God says of David's progeny. "Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me." It is an astounding and unqualified promise. There is no "if." "If you do these things, then I will establish you and your house." There is no "but." "I will establish you and your sons, but you must obey me." It is simple and direct promise, intended for all times.

History, however, provides its own "ifs" and "buts." In a subsequent sermon, I'll be talking about David's personal failings. However, I will note here that, a generation later, David's kingdom is split in half. His dynasty lives on in the Southern kingdom, but with only a few exceptions, David's descendants are

largely self-interested, often corrupt, and generally receive failing grades as leaders for God. Israel has moments of glory, but nothing to equal these initial years of the united kingdom. Many centuries later, when Israel falls before the might of Babylon and the Davidic line is eliminated, the Jewish people begin to rethink not only their political hopes, but their theological understandings, as well. This new interpretive tradition embraces many of the old Yahwist ideals, reaffirms the importance of Torah obedience and recalls the ancient covenant with Moses, and defers its hope for a king in the line of David to an age yet to come, when God will bring a Messiah to save and heal his people. These ideas are what resonate most deeply in the Christian story. Jesus is the new David, the Messiah king who leads his people in peace, justice, and goodness.

I offer this history of an important theological ideal as a reminder that our own faith is born out of a despair over human politics. Not an abandonment of those politics but a sober realization of the insurmountable limits of any merely human program which can never achieve what we all desire and need in community with one another. No human ruler can ever be ultimate. No human-devised system can ever be perfect. Any person or system which claims otherwise is proffering an illusion, most likely, a very dangerous one.

We look then, not simply to our leaders, whether they are in government, business, entertainment, or sports or any other field. Rather, we try to look beyond

them, seeking to ascertain who is leading our leaders. If they are being led by God, even unconsciously so, we owe them our support. If they are being led only by their own selfish motives, we owe them, and ourselves, the voice of dissent.

Such a drama is now being played out in the country of Iran. We have heard of the discord there, protests in the streets, and the violent suppression of those protests. Most moving to me have been the nighttime shouts of countless frustrated and angry men and women. After dusk, they climb to their rooftops and in the darkness loudly proclaim “Allaho Akbar.” It means “God is great.”

I have heard recordings of the sounds they make across the city of Tehran. Haunting sounds. Bold and proud. It is a protest against a despot who claims the title “Supreme Ruler” of Iran. They dispute that claim. Only God can be supreme.

In an interview, one of the protesters said through a translator, “They can take our phone, our internet, all our communications away, but we are showing that by saying ‘Allaho Akbar’ we can find each other.”

God is great. May those words echo from our rooftops, as well. So that we may find one another, and ourselves, to the glory of God. It is within our power, and it is our responsibility.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.