

**8-1-2021 SOUL SONGS: God, Give Grace - A Soul Song of Confession**

*Psalm 51; Romans 7:14-25; John 8:1-11*

*First United Methodist Church - Auburn, Indiana*

*August 1, 2021 - The Reverend Dr. Mark Owen Fenstermacher*

We know about the slingshot, the five smooth stones, and the Philistine giant, but there is so much more about the life of David we may not know. And, since we are in a series of messages on The Book of Psalms, many of which are attributed to David, it might be a good idea to spend a few minutes looking at his life.

I'd like to tell you about David's life, all of it, but we don't have time for that today. It's an extraordinary story and deserves its own set of sermons, I think. So you won't get all of the David story.

Eugene Peterson, in his beautiful small book on the life of David titled *Leap Over a Wall: Earthy Spirituality for Everyday Christians* (HarperSanFrancisco), writes about how the David story helps us learn what it means to walk with God and to be fully human.

"We know more about David than any other person in the Holy Scripture," Peterson writes (p. 3).

The David story is both earthy and godly. It's a story that not only tells us about faithfulness and success, but it tells us about fear, failure, family dysfunction and sin.

"David deals with God," Peterson tells us. "As an instance of humanity in himself, he isn't much. He has little wisdom to pass on to us on how to live successfully. He was an unfortunate parent and an unfaithful husband. From a purely historical point of view he was a barbaric chieftain with a talent for poetry. But David's importance isn't in his morality or his military prowess but in his experience of and witness to God. Every event in his life was a confrontation with God." (p. 5)

The David story tells us, shows us, how God works in our human lives. Not our idealized lives, not the public image we like to project to the rest of the world, but the David story shows us how God works in the lives of very human beings. His story is a story that "never bypasses the ordinary, the everyday."

David is so "emphatically human: David fighting, praying, loving, sinning. David conditioned by the morals and assumptions of a brutal Iron Age culture. David with his eight wives. David angry; David devious; David generous; David dancing. There's nothing, absolutely nothing, that God can't and doesn't use to work his salvation and holiness into our lives," Peterson says in *Leap Over a Wall*.

There is one story I have to tell you. It's the story behind the 51st Psalm.

It's the spring of the year, 2nd Samuel 11 tells us, when kings go out to battle. But David, this time, doesn't join the spring campaign. He stays behind in Jerusalem. He stays behind in the palace.

Maybe he stays behind because he isn't needed. Joab, Israel's 4-star general, has things well under control. David will just get in the way of the professional officer corps if he goes out with the army.

Maybe he stays behind because there are papers to sign, delegations from the Galilee Chamber of Commerce to receive, and a zoning question to settle.

Maybe he stays behind because he is now middle aged and sleeping on a cot in a field tent isn't as attractive as it once was. His bones ache in the morning. Maybe he just doesn't want to be uncomfortable.

Or maybe he is less willing to live with the risk of going into combat. It could be David is beginning to sense that he has pushed his luck about as far as it can reasonably go.

We don't know why he stays behind, but David does.

After a royal nap, one afternoon, David goes out on the roof of the king's house and sees a woman bathing in a home nearby. She was very beautiful, the Bible says. David asked someone about her, and he learned that her name was Bathsheba. She was married to Uriah the Hittite. Uriah, it turns out, was one of David's most loyal, most faithful, most competent officers. The woman's husband happens to be away serving with the army.

David sends messengers to "fetch her." That is what the text says: the king sends messengers to "fetch her." This king is suffering from what too many kings and princes and prime ministers and CEO's suffer from: a sense of entitlement. If they want it, they think they should get it. Whether what they want is a thing or a person.

She has no say in this. There is no indication that Bathsheba is a willing partner for David. The Bible simply reports that "he lay with her."

After he is done with her, David sends her back to her house. No one else needs to know what has happened. Life can now go back to normal, he thinks. The palace servants are trustworthy and know to keep their mouths shut.

Bathsheba conceives and she sends a note to David. The note simply says, "I am pregnant."

David now desperately tries to cover this up. He has Uriah recalled from the front for a little R & R in Jerusalem. David assumes that Uriah will sleep with his wife, Bathsheba, and then the child in the womb -it will be assumed- belongs to Uriah. But Uriah refuses to sleep with Bathsheba while his brothers are fighting and dying at the front: the loyal soldier insists on sleeping in the palace with David's servants. Uriah's loyalty is getting in the way of David's attempt to cover up his sin.

Finally, perhaps remembering how Saul kept sending him off on impossible missions in an attempt to get rid of him, David sends a note to Joab, the commander of the army, and tells Joab to place Uriah where the fighting is most fierce...most dangerous. And, then, then pull back the soldiers who are standing with Uriah. Leave him isolated. Leave him to fight the battle by himself.

Joab does just that. Uriah is killed. Bathsheba goes through a period of mourning. When that time of official grieving is over, David sends for her. He brings to her house. She becomes his wife. And she gives birth to a child.

Everything looks neat and clean, but of course things like this are never neat and clean. What we attempt to hide often comes out.

A prophet named Nathan is prompted by God to go to David. Nathan, like most good preachers, has a point to make and he makes it with a story. There was a rich man with many flocks, the prophet says, and there was a poor man who had only one small lamb. The poor man had bought the lamb. The poor man had raised the lamb. It

grew up with the poor man and his children. It was like a daughter to the poor man. Now, when the rich man decided to host a feast for a visitor, he didn't want to take a lamb from one of his own herds but he took the poor man's lamb. The rich man prepared the poor man's lamb to feed the traveling guest.

Filled with righteous anger, David says to Nathan, "As the LORD lives, the man who has done this deserves to die; he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity."

Nathan says, "You are the man!" The prophet asks the king why he despised the word of the LORD to do something like this...taking Bathesheba and murdering her husband -and your friend- Uriah?

Confronted by this truth, David does something amazing: he simply says, "I have sinned against the LORD." He doesn't explain. He doesn't justify. He doesn't minimize. He doesn't excuse what he has done. David is confronted by the truth and he says, "I have sinned against the LORD."

Nathan says God has already put away David's sin. David is forgiven. But that doesn't mean the consequences of the sin are erased. That is the thing about sin: there is forgiveness with God but sometimes what we have set in motion goes on and on, bringing pain and hurt to others. It's like throwing a rock into a quiet pond: the waves we set in motion by our greed, our lust, our hate, our mean words, our racism, our violence, ripple out in all sorts of directions to touch people we may know and people we may not know.

All of this bring us to the 51st Psalm. It is one of the penitential psalms. Among those would be Psalm 6, Psalm 32, Psalm 38, Psalm 102, Psalm 130 and Psalm 143. Scholars believe this magnificent psalm was in fact written by David as he looked back at his catastrophic failure to be faithful.

As we spend just a few minutes looking at the psalm, I want you to understand that the psalm isn't about David so much as it is about God. God is the central character in the psalm.

The psalm isn't about the failure of David so much as it is a demonstration of the faithfulness of God. The faithfulness of God and the mercy of God are at the heart of this psalm.

The truth is that we cannot understand grace, seeing how powerful and beautiful and life-saving it is, until we have made a mess of things. That's why the people with the best stories of grace, those who are nearly speechless at the wonder of grace, are those who have fallen the hardest. There wasn't a way forward, they couldn't find their way forward, they were trapped by the wreckage of their past, and then grace showed up!

*Have mercy on me, O God,  
according to your steadfast love;  
according to your abundant mercy  
blot out my transgressions.*

David writes a song about how grace found him in the middle of his misery, his failure, and the song is sung directly to God. David realized what he needed most was something only God can really give us, and so the king sings to God. In the opening verse, David refers to the mercy of God, the steadfast love of God and the abundant mercy of God. The Hebrew translated as “abundant mercy” can mean “motherly compassion.”

**2**

*Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,  
and cleanse me from my sin.*

**3**

*For I know my transgressions,  
and my sin is ever before me.*

In verses 2 and 3, David now sings about his sin...is honest about his sin. And he uses several different words to refer to what he has done.

David uses the word “guilt” or “iniquity.” These are words which refer to personal guilt. This was his doing. This wasn’t about the pressures of the job. This wasn’t about the beauty of Bathsheba. This wasn’t about the stubbornness of Uriah who refused to sleep with his wife while home on leave. This wasn’t about a note to sent to General Joab that wasn’t meant to be taken seriously. David refers to his guilt or iniquity, and he is taking responsibility for what he has done.

Healing, redemption, moving beyond our sin, never happens until we are honest. Until we own up to what we have done and stop blaming others.

When the shepherd king uses the word “transgressions,” he is telling us that what he did was wilfull rebellion against God and what he knew was right. This wasn’t an inadvertent mistake but he went after Bathsheba and he had Uriah murdered knowing exactly what he was doing.

We like to explain our failures away...our sins away...but the truth is that often we knew exactly what we were doing when we wrecked ourselves or hurt someone else with our bad decisions.

David says, “I did it. I own it. I’m not blaming anyone else.”

**4**

*Against you, you alone, have I sinned,  
and done what is evil in your sight,  
so that you are justified in your sentence  
and blameless when you pass judgment.*

Then, in verses 4 and 5, David acknowledges that what he has done against Bathsheba and Uriah was actually a sin against God. That is the interesting thing about the God we encounter in the Hebrew Testament and the Christian Testament: when we hurt our neighbor, when we treat our neighbor unjustly, when we are indifferent to the needs of our neighbor, when we use our neighbor like a thing to satisfy our own sexual lust or lust for power or lust for control, we are sinning against God.

We see that in the 25th chapter of the Gospel of Matthew: when we don't welcome the stranger or feed the hungry or clothe the naked or visit the prisoner, we have not just sinned against the other person but we have sinned against God.

That is what too many of us still have yet to learn: we cannot say we love the God we don't see if we do not love the neighbor we do see. We show our love for God by the love we show our neighbor...even the neighbor with whom we disagree and can't stand.

What I have done, David sings, I have done against you.

My sin against them was actually a sin against you, David sings to God.

## 5

*Indeed, I was born guilty,  
a sinner when my mother conceived me.*

In verse 5, David is honest about the human condition. We don't believe that every child is born sinful, in the Methodist Church, but we do understand that children learn quickly enough how to do the selfish thing and say the hurtful thing. People sometimes wax poetic about the innocence of children, and I agree that children are beautiful and a gift to the world. "But," I ask people, "if you have ever watched children during recess on a playground you may find out just how sinful, selfish, and hateful children can be.

Paul says, in Romans 3:23, that all of us have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

To be human is to be a creature who is, as the psalmist says in Psalm 8, little less than the angels. To be human is to be crowned with glory and honor by the Creator. But the truth is, as today's reading from Romans reminds us, that we are a walking, internal civil war between good and evil. The good we would do, we don't. The evil we would avoid, we do.

To be human is to be beautiful and generous and courageous and compassionate. And it is also to be a sinner.

To be human is to be a sinner. To be human is to fail. To be human is to do the things you would not do and fail to do some of the things you were committed to doing.

## 6

*You desire truth in the inward being;  
therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.*

David knows that what God for us that we would be real, be honest, and open to the truth of God, down deep. Not just on the surface. Not just on the person we are in public but in our "inward being."

As a teenager in Alaska, I remember taking buckets of water out rivers and letting the sediment settle to the bottom. The water was pretty clear when we took it out of the water, but when we let the bucket sit for awhile we would be surprised to see the

particles and dirt that ended up on the bottom. The water above was clearer than it had been...we had given it time to clear.

Letting the truth of God reach our inward being is like letting the water sit so that the particles of dirt settle to the bottom. The truth of God needs to reach the deepest parts of who we are.

I think that when I hear Christians say hateful things, or write hateful things, about persons of color or about people on the other side of an issue or LGBTQ persons or the rich or the poor or people who use a different name for God. I want to ask, "How can you be a follower of Jesus and speak in this way...act in this way...judge in this way...hate in this way?" I want to ask if they have read the Sermon on the Mount. I want to ask if they have let the truth of God reach their "inward being."

Then, in the following verses, David asks God to do what only God can do: purge his sins, wash him, and let even the broken parts of him rejoice in the mercy of God.

A few weeks ago, I watched Tom Hanks's film *News of the World*. It is, in my eyes, a wonderful movie because it is built on the foundation of a wonderful story. Tom Hanks plays the part of a former Confederate army officer, Capt. Jefferson Kyle Kidd, who travels back and forth across the American West in the years after the Civil War reading people the news of the world.

He carries a bundle of newspapers with him, from cities like St. Louis and Dallas and Kansas City, and he visits out of the way places where he reads the top stories of the day to people who pay a dime each to hear about the outside world.

Kidd finds a 10-year old girl named Johanna whose family -German settlers- had been killed during an attack by the Kiowa people. The girl had been taken by the tribe and raised as a member of the tribe. Then, the members of the tribe who had raised her were killed by white settlers. Kidd comes across the girl in the wilderness, she speaks almost no English, and he discovers that no one else is willing to return her to her nearest surviving relatives who live far to the south.

Johanna says to Kidd, "I want to go home." The question, of course, is where home for her is now. And with whom.

He takes her through dangerous territory. He protects her. She begins to speak a little English, and she teaches him some Kiowa. The girl learns to trust him. Her eyes sparkle when she gathers dimes from the crowds before Kidd reads the headlines. And the girl loves the stories that Kidd tells.

When he returns her to her relatives, she is clearly heartbroken as he rides off. He leaves her with stern, hard-working farmers who aren't interested in books or reading her stories. They are more interested in how hard the girl can work and what she can contribute to the operation of the farm.

Not long after he has left her, Capt. Kidd returns to the farm. He finds Johanna tied to log, a rope around one of her feet. He says to the family, "My mistake. She doesn't belong here."

Then, he kneels down, undoes the rope around her ankle and says, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry" in Kiowa. "You belong with me, Johanna. You belong with me."

"Captain, Johanna go," the girl asks.

"Yes," he says. "If that's what you want."

Only God can untie the rope that is around the ankle of David. Only the grace of God can untie the rope that won't let David move forward beyond the wreckage he has caused by his poor, impulsive, sinful choices.

Grace unties the rope.

Grace sets us free.

**7**

*Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;  
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.*

When I was in college, I worked in a women's dormitory. I was one of the guys in a starched white jacket who served the food. One day I reached into an oven to lift the top off a tray of grilled steaks, and the area between my thumb and index finger touched the top of the oven. The oven melted an oval about the size of a quarter on my hand. For the next twenty years or so, I had a mark on my hand that I assumed would always be there. Then, one day, I looked down and the burn mark, the scar, was gone.

It's not like that with our sin. Time doesn't automatically heal all wounds. Healing, deep healing, comes by way of grace. And grace comes from God.

**8**

*Let me hear joy and gladness;  
let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.*

**9**

*Hide your face from my sins,  
and blot out all my iniquities.*

**10**

*Create in me a clean heart, O God,  
and put a new and right spirit within me.*

**11**

*Do not cast me away from your presence,  
and do not take your holy spirit from me.*

**12**

*Restore to me the joy of your salvation,  
and sustain in me a willing spirit.*

Mercy brings joy. Forgiveness brings joy. Redemption brings joy.

David, in his song to God, says that he will tell his story. His confession, his honesty about his brokenness, will not be just between him and God but it will be a public thing. He will let others know about his experience with grace. Because a first-hand story of grace, of redemption, is a powerful gift to share with others.

Sometimes the best gift we can give to those who feel defeated by their sins, by their wrong turns, is to tell them about how grace found us and how grace -as the hymn says- led us home.

**13**

*Then I will teach transgressors your ways,  
and sinners will return to you.*

**14**

*Deliver me from bloodshed, O God,  
O God of my salvation,  
and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance.*

**15**

*O Lord, open my lips,  
and my mouth will declare your praise.*

**16**

*For you have no delight in sacrifice;  
if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased.*

**17**

*The sacrifice acceptable to God[d] is a broken spirit;  
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.*

More than great hymns, more than profound theological statements, more than breath-taking financial gifts, what God wants from us is that we would be real. Honest. Humble. No pretend.

In her small book, *The Velveteen Rabbit*, Margery Williams teaches us that becoming real takes time.

The book is about a stuffed, toy rabbit who wants to become real. Given to a small boy as a Christmas present, the stuffed rabbit is set aside while the boy plays with the flashier toys.

The oldest toy in the nursery is the Skin Horse. The Skin Horse is owned by the boy's uncle. The Skin Horse tells the rabbit that toys become real as they are loved by children.

One night, the child's nanny gives the boy the rabbit to sleep with in place of another toy. The toy rabbit becomes the boy's favorite toy. Time passes and the stuffed rabbit begins to look a little shabby but the rabbit is happy.

Other, real rabbits point out to the toy rabbit that he cannot hop and run as they do, and so he must not be a real rabbit.

But, later in the small book, he has become real because he has been loved by the boy. Even if his skin is now worn and dirty, and his eyes are loose.

What God wants for us is that we would be real. Not pretend. And we become real, I believe, as we let God love us. As we are.

It's a story about grace.

It's a story about who God is.

It's a story about who God will be.

What's your story of grace?

Maybe today is the day to be honest in a way we have never been. Maybe today is the day when we allow grace to lead us home...