



Saul's Best Moment and Black Lives Matter

TEXT
1 Samuel 17:24-40

June 14, 2020 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

I didn't read the end of the story. I imagine you remember how it ends. In this season defined by multiple crises, I wanted to make sure we recognized the astonishing moment when David gets to define what is going on. I notice it because in those days, given his lack of status, David shouldn't be talking.

That's what Eliab says. Eliab is David's elder brother. He asks David, "What are you doing here? I know the evil in your heart. Here we are fighting the battle of our lives, and you are 'chatting it up.' This is a war between the armies of Saul and the Philistines. You are no soldier; you are just a shepherd. Go home." As an elder brother myself, I recognize this kind of reasoning. Who wants their baby brother who has never seen a day of battle talking strategy in the camp?

But somehow, and I imagine it's only by the grace of God, David not only talks, but is listened to. And this shepherd boy has a different story to tell. He says, "I can do this. The Lord God saved me from the paw of the lion and of the bear and God will protect me from the giant." This is not

about the armies of Saul; this is about God, for every moment is a God moment.

Nobody else saw that. This narrative of what is really going on came from an unexpected source.

The most amazing moment in the story is probably King Saul's best moment of his reign. Unlike Eliab, Saul listens. Sometimes God is most clearly seen when people of power listen. Saul listens. Saul is clumsy at it. "Here, wear my armor," Saul tells him. "If you are going to do this, at least do it like I would do it."

But David has a different story to tell. David said, "That armor doesn't fit me. I have to rely on God."

These are unsettling days — days defined by pandemic, pain and protests. And one of the unsettling things happening all around us is there are a lot of Davids out there who have their own story to tell, and it's different from the majority narrative. We have a story of who we are as a people, who we are as a church, who we are as a nation. But some are saying they have a different story to tell.

I think we need to be a bit like Saul and listen. It's time to hear some voices that don't

often have the social power to speak.

I put on my mask and joined lots of other people — physically distancing pretty well — to attend a protest. Some of you were there. Other members of our staff were there. There were black and Asian, Hispanic and white folks. Police and National Guard stood watch. There were lots of young people. Thank God for the young people.

There was some anger; there was a lot of pain expressed. There was a deep weariness with the realities of what Condoleezza Rice has called America's birth defect: systemic racism. And there were chants and signs that said, "Black Lives Matter." I think Black Lives Matter rubs some of us the wrong way. You ask, "What do you mean black lives matter? All lives matter."

Yeah, they do. Of course, all lives matter. Let me tell you how I see this. You may see it differently, but hear me out. When it comes to engaging the power structures of society, it's not just law enforcement, but also healthcare, education, certainly the economy and housing. Well, all lives aren't treated the same. The data is

overwhelming. So, in theory all lives matter, but in practice they don't matter the same, and I understand the Black Lives Matter movement to be saying it's the practice where it needs to matter.

So, when we say, all lives matter, we sound a bit like Eliab here. Who are you to challenge my narrative?

This happened before. There was a time when, right here in this church, preachers proclaimed the love of God for all men. The Bible said it just that way. But then some women began to point out that we might say God loves all men and women, not just mankind, but humankind. And we said, but "all men" includes women. That's what we said. When we say men, we mean women too, because all "men" matter.

Even as we said this, women couldn't get the jobs that men could get. And when they did, they got paid less than men for the same work. That's still true. And women better not show anger in a meeting — and don't expect to be able to speak without being interrupted. So, some women said, "Dear Eliab, you can say all women matter, but we see some things differently, and they began to tell their narrative." We needed to listen. We need to say black lives matter because in so many circumstances they don't.

One voice I listened to this week was Rev. Danny Murphy. He's a Presbyterian pastor in South Carolina, and his brother is a police officer. Recently, he was going to take a walk with

a friend and he said, "Before we go, let me get my driver's license."

"You need a driver's license to take a walk?"

"No, I need a driver's license in case someone is concerned that a black man is walking in this neighborhood and calls the police. I need to prove that I am walking in my own neighborhood. Folks have called the police before because this Presbyterian pastor was out taking a walk. I have no idea how you deal with the stress of living your whole life knowing your skin color is reason for suspicion."

If I understand it, that is why people of color have a different story to tell, and it is one we need to hear.

Some will say, "But this isn't fair. There are good police officers." Of course there are. Some are in this church family, and they are people I hold with highest respect. Just a few weeks ago in New York, every night at 7:00, people would go out on balconies and hang out windows and beat pots and pans in a show of appreciation for first responders. That included the police, many of whom were at risk for the virus because of their service. They deserve that praise.

This is more complicated than good and bad folks. This is about power and powerlessness. Power is not shared equally in this world. There is economic power; there is cultural power; there is political power; there is legal power. And history has taught us that a

strong temptation of the powerful is to believe that "we have our power because we deserve it, because we are better" and, by implication, those who lack power are lesser.

It is a seductive temptation to assume that we are powerful because we are good, rather than to confess that because we are powerful, we have additional responsibility to pursue that which is good.

There is a moment in the novel *Poisonwood Bible* when Orleanna, a mother of four daughters, says, "When push comes to shove, a mother loves her children from the bottom up."¹ It is the child who is hurt, who is sick, who is in need who gets the attention at the moment. In that moment, that is the child that *matters*.

Mothers love like that, and I think God does too.

I have been at this a long time. It was 30 years ago that I went back to school to get a master's degree in Black Theology, the theological engagement of Christian faith from the black experience. And still I feel a bit clumsy with it all. But that clumsiness is what makes it all the more important to be more like Saul and listen. Don't check out when we hear things we don't really want to hear. Hang in even when the narrative of what is going on right now is different from the narrative we might offer. Recognize that there might be a little bit of Eliab in us that says, "But who are you to talk?"

That's the moment to lean in like Saul and listen, even

if we are a bit clumsy. For by listening, we are much more likely to hear what God wants from us in this moment.

¹Barbara Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible* (1998), p. 444

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.