

Sunday June 20th, 2021
Father's Day

PRAYER: You are great, O God, and deserving of praise. Your works attest to your grandeur; your love exceeds comprehension. Wherever we look, we see signs of your splendor; the good that we do is a result of your grace. You fill your sanctuary with the presence of your Holy Spirit; you send your Word, Jesus, to dwell in our midst. We are surrounded by testimony to your loving goodness; we bow before you and give you our praise. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER: Gracious, Loving, Holy, Father, we read in your word that in your house are many mansions or rooms, and our brother and Saviour Jesus has gone to prepare a place for us. How marvelous and how comforting is the knowledge and assurance that we always have a place in your house; in our Father's house. How incredible it is to know that we are not servants or visitors to your presence, but welcomed as sons and daughters. At your table there is a place for us, as we rejoice in your holy presence around your throne. The old words of the poet read, "Home is where the heart is, and my hearts on home." No truer words can express how we feel contemplating your love and grace.

We thank you for our place prepared for us and for the attention Jesus has given it for our eventual arrival but our thoughts and hearts are focused today on our other home. Home is what we call the geographical place in which we dwell on this earth with our families. Home, where we long to feel safe, loved and welcomed. Home, where we find our place, prepared by those around us. Thank you, O God, for our homes, whether they are apartments, condos, or town houses or detached houses. For we know that the bricks and mortar are really irrelevant. The quality and style of the building does not determine the quality of the home. A shack can be just as much a home as a mansion, if love dwells there. In a home that is truly more than bricks and mortar, the heart is what matters. The hearts of those who call it home.

We also confess, O Lord that our homes are not what they should be, all the time. We have our beautiful moments, where love, respect and mutual care flow easily and freely, but there are times when we are challenged by circumstances and love gets hampered. So, many things can have a negative impact on our homes and we pray father for all the homes represented here. If the pressures of financial matters is oppressing our homes, help us find a prudent way out of the burden. If relationships are strained, even running cold, we pray for reconciliation, forgiveness and a restoring of the warmth of companionship and love. If our homes have been darkened by loss or illness we pray for your strength to keep the bonds of family strong. Heal our illness, O God, comfort our grief, and keep us safe from the stresses that threaten to pull families apart.

Today, especially, we pray for fathers, husbands, uncles, brothers: the men who lead our homes, sometimes alone and sometimes in partnership with their spouses. The pressures of this world can be overwhelming for many men, trying to provide not only financially, but also emotionally, and as primary care givers to young children. As a group of fathers and men we know we are not perfect. We have made mistakes in our relationships, and perhaps caused estrangement with our children. We confess that in our pride we have resisted reconciliation, and have not always made the first move to restore our relationships. Teach us Lord to check our pride at the door, if it is what keeps us from abundant relationships with our spouses, our children, our families and our friends. Let peace reign in our homes, and let that peace begin with us.

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Let our families know us not for the fear we instill but the love we offer. Bless the fathers today, O Great Heavenly Father. Bless our homes and please help us in some measure, by your grace, to make special places in our homes, for our children, that point them to a picture of the beauty of the place you have prepared for them in your house. And may we also make our homes a place where the stranger is welcomed in your name, and where they too may find a place of refuge and rest.

BENEDICTION: Make our hearts strong, O God, as you did with your servant David. Then, when the armies of this world assemble at our gate, when the fears and fates meet to conspire our ruin, they shall be astounded. In an instant, they shall panic; in a moment, they shall scatter. For we shall stand before them in faith, as if stilling the winds upon the sea!

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1 Samuel 17:1-11, 22-51

"Helping Sprouts Grow."

In honour of this special day when we recognize and celebrate fatherhood, I offer to you some thoughts about being a dad. One definition of fatherhood is, "A father is a man who carries photographs where his money used to be." Bill Cosby said, "Fatherhood is pretending the present you love most is soap-on-a-rope." Joey Adams states, "My father taught me everything about the birds and the bees. He didn't know anything about girls."

The first-grade teacher asked one of her students if he knew his numbers. He said he did—that his father had taught him. "Okay," the teacher said, "let's see how much he taught you." The boy agreed, so the teacher asked, "What number comes after two?" "Three," the boy answered. "What comes after five?" "Six." "What comes after eight?" "Nine." The teacher was pleased with the boy.

"Very good," praised the teacher. "It looks like your father did a great job. So, tell me, what comes after ten?" "A jack," the boy answered. Fathers; you got to love them. For good or for ill, they seek to instill in their children the skills, attitudes, and observations they believe their children need to succeed in life. And when a home is without a father, the absence can be profoundly felt by the children.

So, even with our many failings, fathers are still valuable and wanted. Now, I was thinking about fathers, and being a father myself, and I wondered; what is the one thing I wish I could have known right off in being a father, and I came to a startling and humbling answer. Now, this can be a bit unsettling for folks to hear, but the one thing I wish I had known is "Fathers, don't always know what is best."

I know that is a big surprising to you. I mean I am sure that none of your fathers ever made mistakes, or made bad judgments. Your fathers were probably the rare ones that were wise beyond their years, fountains of incredible knowledge, and patient beyond belief. Your fathers, I am sure, never jumped to conclusions about what you were up to, and never ever, overestimated, or underestimated your abilities.

Come on people. We dads are not perfect, and we all know it. How many times have we said to ourselves, "If only"? If only dad had said...? If only dad had done...? If only dad had been there when...? Even the best fathers drop the ball occasionally, and some dads don't even bother to pick it up in the first place. We dads say we love our kids, and we want the best for them, but we still mess up.

And of all the mistakes we make in being fathers, the greatest one, maybe, is that we underestimate our kids, or even worse, we think we know exactly what is best for our son or daughter's future. I've got news for all the dad's out there, sometimes, actually maybe all the time; we really don't know what is best. If you need any proof of this fact, look no further than the relationship of David and his father Jesse.

Now we must be careful in not reading too much into this story.

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The culture of that day was considerably different than what we are accustomed to today, and the family structure of Jesse's household is very foreign to us. The culture of the day was very patriarchal. In each household, the father was lord and master. In fact, did you notice that David's mother is never talked about? Even though she gave birth to eight sons, and assuming it was the same mother for all the boys, not a word about her.

And whether David had sisters, is really unknown to us, again because of this patriarchal society. For many reasons, David was, to borrow a phrase from an old saint I knew, the "tail-end Charlie" of the household. He was the youngest, and as such, his prospects were not great. His older brothers would inherit Jesse's wealth, and David would be forced to take menial jobs to survive, or become a soldier. Being young and it seems expendable, David is sent out to watch sheep.

I said expendable, because shepherding was dangerous work, as David's encounter with a lion and bear reveals to us. It could also be lonely work, but to his credit, David obviously used his time wisely in learning music. Maybe he used music to calm the sheep, but I suspect he used it to calm himself. As a youth, and as the youngest, David's opinions were not sought in family matters, and I am sure his brothers all but ignored him. He would have been that pesky younger brother we all dread.

So, it is not surprising that when the prophet Samuel comes to honour Jesse's home, and anoint the future king, David isn't even summoned. The presence of the great prophet of Israel was a big deal, and a real honour, but whatever honour was to be bestowed on Jesse and his sons, was not for David in Jesse's mind. I mean, why would the prophet care if the youngest of eight was present or not.

And so, Samuel, not even aware of David's existence, goes about sacrificing to God and purifying Jesse's family as God had commanded him. Then he seeks to anoint the future king of Israel out of Jesse's boys. He meets the eldest Eliab, and declares that this confident, powerful man, must be the Lord's choice, but it wasn't to be. God says to Samuel, "Don't judge by his appearance or height, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not make decisions the way you do!" (1 Samuel 16:7)

The same goes for the other six sons present, and each is rejected. Samuel is confused. He is running out of candidates. Jesse must be wondering, "What is the prophet looking for?" Out of frustration perhaps, Samuel turns to Jesse, "Is this all of your sons?" Jesse replies kind of nonchalantly, "Well, there is the youngest, but he is out watching the sheep." "Send for him at once!" Samuel shouts.

Upon seeing this young boy, this "tail-end Charlie", Samuel hears the Lord speak, "This is the one; anoint him." In the presence of his seven brothers and his father, David is anointed by the prophet, and the Spirit of the Lord fell upon David in a mighty way. As far as we know, neither Jesse, nor David, was ever told what this was all about.

As Samuel returns to Ramah, life went back to normal, with everyone scratching their heads.

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The only thing that comes about, for a long time, is that David comes to the court of Saul, to play his harp to calm the King's spirit. King Saul was a very troubled soul. He was a reluctant king, and it seems severe depression haunted him. The only thing that seemed to make him feel better was music, especially the music David played. David, still in the eyes of everyone, is a young, musically gifted mind you, boy from the backwater town of Bethlehem.

Under normal circumstances he would not have been even a footnote in history books. That all changes, of course, when a man called Goliath comes a calling on Israel's army. This frightening guy is reported to be nine feet tall. His armour weighed 125 pounds, and his spear was the thickness of a weaver's beam, and carried a fifteen-pound spear head.

His enormous size has led to speculation about how he got this way, and the best answer I found, was that scholars believe his enormous size was due to a tumour on his pituitary gland that increased his growth rate. All I know is that he is huge, and he terrified everyone.

Goliath's strategy was to come out every day, onto the battlefield, and offer to fight Israel's best warrior one on one. The idea being, that instead of hundreds of warriors battling it out, the future of the war would be decided by single combat. Sounds simple enough, but who is going to fight this guy? Day after day, Goliath comes out and taunts Israel, King Saul, and God; and day after day the Israelite warriors shrink back in fear.

Because of the war, David was not needed to play music in the king's court so he was home once again minding sheep. Therefore, Jesse tasks David with taking supplies to his three older brothers who are serving in the army. David arrives just as the army is taking to their positions at day break, and out of curiosity, he leaves his food gifts with the provision's officer, and goes to find his brothers.

He soon hears Goliath making his daily taunt, and he sees the Israelites running away and asks the obvious, "What's going on here?" The men tell him the story, and add that Saul has offered a great reward to the one who slays the giant. The reward includes one of the king's daughters, and tax freedom for his family. David can't believe the story, so he confirms it with others, and sure enough he learns it is true.

David continues to walk among the troops verifying the story, asking questions, and generally making a nuisance of himself. Eliab, David's eldest brother, runs across him, and angrily demands to know why he is there and more importantly, who is minding the sheep. Obviously, the sheep were more valuable than David in Eliab's eyes. Eliab even criticizes David, for in his words David was, "Prideful and dishonest, and just wanted to see the battle." In other words, he suffered from a morbid curiosity.

David wasn't dissuaded by his brother, and kept walking around asking questions. Somebody realized that David was the king's harpist, and reported the fact that David was carrying on with his questions. Then, as you know, young David declares his willingness to go, and fight Goliath.

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Saul's response spoke for everyone, "Don't be ridiculous!" "You're just a boy, and he has been a soldier since he was a boy." David, who eventually becomes an incredible warrior, first encounter with warfare, was this investigative journey he just made to his brothers. To support his offer to fight Goliath, David gives his resume to the king, about his triumphs over the bear and the lion, and he declares his faith that the Lord will deliver the giant into his hands.

Saul, realizing that no one else will even dare to approach Goliath, and perhaps being weary of this stalemate, allows him to fight, and you know the rest of the story. My point in all of this is that David was sold short by everyone: his father Jesse, his brothers, and Saul. No one expected anything from this boy except playing music and shepherding. Yet, what is most critical in this story is that only one assessment of David had any value.

As God said to Samuel, "The Lord doesn't make decisions the way you do! People judge by outward appearance, but the Lord looks at a person's thoughts and intentions." Jesse thought he knew his sons very well. He knew what they could do, based on life's experience and their appropriate ages. Sending the boy, David, to tend sheep while his older three brothers went off to war, was wise thinking.

Today we shudder at the tragic nature of child soldiering in this world, and even in David's day no one would sanction using a child to fight, especially fight a giant. As parents, we constantly are assessing our children's ability to engage in age-appropriate activities. A two-year-old should not drive a car, nor should an eight-year-old take up smoking. David's experience, maybe an exceptional one, but we should still be cautioned by it.

God has a plan for our children, and it may indeed be true that God has not decided to reveal that plan to you as a parent; at least not now. That plan may even include going places, and taking on giants, and if we knew, we would be apt to lock them up, and throw away the key. But here comes the hard part to accept. Whose sons were the 8 boys from Bethlehem in this story? Were they Jesse's sons, or were they Saul's or maybe they were Israel's?

They may very well be Jesse's offspring, and as any good parent he was in authority over them, likewise Saul was the king and he had authority over his subjects, but David belonged to neither one of these men. His future was determined by God, as his anointing signified. It was God's plan that mattered for David, not Jesse's or Saul's. It was God's assessment of David that mattered, not Goliath's.

As parents we are constantly assessing our children, wondering what future they will have. We ask questions about: what career is best for them, what schools should they go to, who should they marry, and a number of other questions? We experience tremendous frustration when our best conceived plans for our children do not come to fruition. We beat ourselves up, as if we are some sort of failure, by not getting our kids to do what we feel is best for their future.

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Perhaps we have got it all wrong. Maybe instead of insisting that our voice carry the most weight in our children's lives, we should, as they grow and mature, teach them how to hear God's voice. If they can hear God's voice, they are no longer prone to be overestimated or underestimated. If they can hear God's voice, they are no longer susceptible to the lies the evil one tries to plant such as "you are not important".

If they can hear God's voice through the clamour of all the other voices, including our own, then maybe they can find purpose, and more importantly peace. Our children will all face giants someday. These giants may come in many forms. They may be called: financial pressure, career pressure, relationship pressure, and so on. And the reality is, that we will not always be there to rescue them, or try to force ill-fitting armour on them.

But if we have done our parenting correctly, they will possess the weapons they need to slay the giants in their lives. Not with five smooth stones and a sling, but with the strength and presence of God. If it helps, think of your children as having been anointed by God, for his purpose and glory. As David said so boldly while he faced Goliath, "The battle is not ours. The Lord will give you to us!"

I hope this story of David inspires all parents to look at their children, and see more than just a boy or just a girl. Rather, I hope we can see in our children, the hand of God directing them to a life of adventure, where not even giants can stop them.