

Out with the Old, In with the New

Second Sunday After Pentecost, June 14, 2009

Jill R. Russell

Texts: 1 Samuel 15.34-16.13;
Psalm 20,
2 Corinthians 5.6-17,
Mark 4.26-34

Out with the old, In with the new. I don't know where that phrase first began but it is certainly familiar to all of us. Where you sit makes a big difference for whether this mantra sounds liberating or threatening. When these words are uttered by your IT department making plans to update your painfully slow computer systems – it can sound a little bit like Christmas! But if they come from your headquarters describing plans to outsource your division – it can send you into an entirely different place.

How you hear this story depends on whether you are loyal to Saul about to be displaced from the throne or whether you are cheering on the young David about to begin the adventure of a lifetime. Walter Brueggemann writes a wonderful introduction to the book of 1 and 2 Samuel in which he observes the complex dynamics that go into the telling of this story. Since we will be hearing the story of David throughout a good part of the summer, I wanted to spend a moment framing this for us today.

Brueggemann argues that there are several perspectives that need to be held in tension as we read these texts if we want to be faithful both to the traditions that gave us these texts and our own engagement with these texts today. He names these three perspectives or factors in this way: the politics of Israel, the personality of David, and providence of God.¹ As we read these stories throughout this summer, we want to caution against letting any one of these factors drop from view. You cannot help but keep track of the personality of David as he looms large in all of these stories. Keeping track of the politics of Israel is a little trickier since this is not a time or a culture familiar to most of us. But if we ignore the very human, historical and political dynamics at play in these texts and adopt an overly pious reading of the texts, we may misunderstand what is happening. And even more importantly, we will not let these texts speak to the political and communal nature of our life together.

On the other hand if our only concerns are questions of history and we want to sweep aside all references to the presence and providence of God because they

¹ Brueggemann, Walter. *First and Second Samuel, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), pgs. 1-3.

contradict our theological assumptions or violate our modern sensibilities, we will similarly miss the richness of what these texts have to say to us. What Brueggemann offers as an alternative is an artistic reading of these stories. He suggests that we read these stories as stories and let the shape of the story itself guide the way we hold these factors together.

After all, isn't that the way we experience our own life? We know that there are these larger forces and realities (political, social, economic factors) that shape and constrain and impact the direction of our lives. And then there is the very particular personality, psychology, and life history that make my experience within this cultural milieu very different from your experience. Somehow in the mix of all these complex dynamics we believe that God is present. And not just present but we believe God is active - at work in me - in you - in the world. The work that God is doing has to do with this new creation as Paul describes it in 2 Corinthians.

In the story of David, in the parables of Jesus, and in Paul's letter to the Corinthians - there is a consistent theme across these very different texts: the surprising **place** from which the new thing God is doing will come. In the case of Samuel anointing a new King, everything about it is unusual. The timing of it is most unusual. Saul is still on the throne making this secret anointing a very dangerous endeavor to say the least. The location is also unexpected. If you were to look at a map of the kingdom of Israel under the reign of Saul you would see that Samuel goes outside the kingdom to anoint David. Bethlehem is further south than Saul's kingdom has extended to date. Then there is the particular son of Jesse whom Samuel selects: not the oldest and most impressive of his sons...not even one of the seven initially presented. That little detail is significant because seven is the biblical number of completion or wholeness.

This whole story hinges on the aphorism that sits at the center of this text and is echoed throughout all our texts today: "For the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart."² It is remarkable that Israel's rise to power and importance will come through this one who is from the outside - from a province outside the kingdom - from the eighth son of Jesse - the one who is not even important enough to be present when the prophet of God arrives.

The Church in Corinth is dealing with a similar dynamic of surprise. They initially respected Paul as an apostle of Jesus Christ but some surprising things have happened in Paul's life between the first letter he writes to this church and the second one we read from today. The church has become disillusioned with him. We really don't know what happened to Paul in Asia in the time between the first and second letters except that it was devastating. Early in this second letter he talks

² 1 Samuel 15.7, NRSV.

about being so utterly, unbearably crushed that he despaired of life itself³. Frankly it sounds an awful lot like what we would call a nervous breakdown. Maybe they were unprepared to see an apostle of Christ suffer that kind of despair and hardship. The ancient world often viewed suffering as a sign of God's displeasure or punishment. There seemed to be some leaders among them who were, from outward appearances, much more impressive than Paul and this has led some of them to question his credibility as an apostle.

Here's the point of connection to the story of David. Paul reminds them of the danger inherent in regarding people from a human point of view. They may have seen his suffering as a sign of weakness but Paul experienced it as a point of transformation. When he was in the midst of despair and felt himself on the edge of death - when he got to the bottom of himself - that is when he felt the love of Christ urging him on. He discovered a vitality and energy and focus he attributes to the very life and love of God at work in him. It leads him to the pinnacle of our passage today: If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away, everything has become new.⁴

As I said before, whether you hear this as liberating or threatening depends entirely on how attached you are to the old life that is passing away. Meister Eckard (a 14th century mystic) once made the observation that the spiritual life is comprised of subtraction more than addition.⁵ It's not as if we get to keep living life as we have always lived it and simply add a few new habits: like Sunday worship, evening prayer, or an occasional offering - as if these habits of piety are what God is after with us. Paul talks about a total reorientation so that we live not for ourselves but for Christ. For those of us whose lives have been filled with ambition, success, self-determination, comfort - the claim that anyone who is in Christ is a new creation might have a rather threatening ring to it. If I don't live for myself, then what might God ask me to do?

Parker Palmer, in his book, *The Active Life*, follows this train of thought in his final chapter to a poem he discovered written by the Guatemalan poet, Julia Esquivel, entitled *They Have Threatened Us With Resurrection*.⁶ This is a complex poem both theologically and emotionally. I don't intend to explain it to you here this morning. I have provided a copy of the entire poem for you as an insert in your bulletin. When I was reading the poem this week, it got me thinking about the debate at General Synod this week around the Belhar Confession. I couldn't help but wonder if part of the discomfort for some in our denomination with this confession is that it comes from a very specific political and historical setting that

³ See 2 Corinthians 1.8

⁴ See 2 Corinthians 5.17

⁵ Elliott, Mark Barger. *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 3* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), pg. 135.

⁶ Palmer, Parker. *The Active Life* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990), pg. 144-146.

is not our own.⁷ The theology that comes out of that context presses us to look at the ways that people in all places suffer because of injustice. It may very well press us to examine the ways that we have participated in or at least benefitted from those systems of injustice. The new life that the Belhar holds out for us may very well cost us something. Whether it sounds liberating or threatening depends on where you stand.

But what our brothers and sisters in South Africa will tell you, what Julia Esquivel reveals in her poem, is that it is well worth the price to press through our fear of what new life might cost us. Because what is available to us on the other side of that new creation is worth any price we might have to pay to get there. What I heard reported from General Synod is that the Belhar passed because minds and hearts were transformed as people spoke and listened to one another.

Transformation comes most powerfully through the stories and testimonies and the poetry that we share that stir our imaginations and make it possible for us to discover that God is at work in unusual ways taking us to surprising places. Today – as we celebrate the new creation we are in Christ – and in honor of the passage of the Belhar confession...I want to conclude our reflections this morning through the poetry of Julia Esquivel (excerpted):

It isn't the noise in the streets that keeps us from resting, my friend, nor is it the shouts of the young people coming out drunk from "St. Paul's" bar, nor is it the tumult of those who pass by excitedly on their way to the mountain.

There is something here within us which doesn't let us sleep, which doesn't let us rest, which doesn't stop pounding deep inside, it is the silent, warm weeping of Indian women without their husbands, it is the sad gaze of the children fixed there beyond memory, in the very pupil of our eyes which during sleep, though closed, keep watch with each contraction of the heart, in every awakening.

Now six of them have left us, and nine in Rabinal,⁸ and two, plus two, plus two, and ten, a hundred, a thousand, a whole army witness to our pain, our fear, our courage, our hope!

What keeps us from sleeping is that they have threatened us with Resurrection!

They have threatened us with Resurrection, because they are more alive than ever before, because they transform our agonies, and fertilize our struggle, because they pick us up when we fall, and gird us like giants before the fear of those demented gorillas.

They have threatened us with Resurrection because they do not know life (poor things!).

⁷ The Belhar Confession was crafted in response to the painful reality of apartheid in South Africa.

⁸ A military massacre of peasants took place in Rabinal, a town in Guatemala. Julia Esquivel is an exiled poet from Guatemala (Parker, pg. 143).

That is the whirlwind which does not let us sleep, the reason why asleep, we keep watch, and awake, we dream.

No, it's not the street noises, nor the shouts from the drunks in "St. Peter's bar, nor the noise from the fans in the ball park. It is the internal cyclone of a kaleidoscopic struggle which will heal that wound of the quetzal⁹ fallen in Ixcán.¹⁰ It is the earthquake soon to come that will shake the world and put everything in its place.

No, brother, it is not the noise in the streets which does not let us sleep.

Accompany us then on this vigil and you will know what it is to dream! You will then know how marvelous it is to live threatened with Resurrection!

To dream awake, to keep watch asleep, to live while dying and to already know oneself resurrected!

⁹ A quetzal is a tropical bird that is the national symbol of Guatemala that dies when it is caged (Parker, pg. 143-144).

¹⁰ Ixcán is a place rich in minerals where Indian peasants have been driven off their native land by the wealthy and powerful (Parker, pg. 144).