

Lent 4

March 26, 2017
1 Samuel 16:1-13; Psalm 23

Saint Andrew Lutheran Church, Franklin, TN
Katherine Museus

I'm going to begin this morning by thinking about the first of today's readings. But I know that you all just heard a rather long gospel reading, and your memory banks may have been maxed out by that. So let's remember back to that first reading together: back in ancient Israel, in the days of the nation's very first king, the Lord had decided that king, Saul, was no longer God's chosen king of Israel, and so the Lord told the prophet Samuel to go and anoint the next king. Samuel was not a fan of his new divine assignment; God was sending Samuel to commit treason against the king — the same king Samuel had anointed himself not very long ago. "How can I go?" he asked God, "If Saul hears of it, he will kill me." But "Samuel did what the Lord commanded," in spite of his own fears.

The famous Psalm 23 — known as "The Shepherd's Psalm" — had of course not been written yet when Samuel set off on his mission. According to tradition the young shepherd boy that Samuel would anoint that day would write that psalm years later, when he was known as King David. Still, I wonder if Samuel prayed something very similar to Psalm 23 as he travelled to Jesse's home to commit treason for the Lord.

*The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not be in want.
The Lord makes me lie down in green pastures,
And leads me beside still waters.*

Of course the Lord was not leading Samuel beside still waters; the Lord was taking Samuel into very dangerous territory, into white water rapids full of sharp rocks.

*You restore my soul, O Lord,
And guide me along right pathways for your name's sake.*

But was this really the "right pathway"? Setting up a new person to be king, potentially stirring up rebellion, dividing the allegiance of the people?

I'm sure Samuel had a lot of questions for God, and a lot of doubt and fear. Still he moved forward, following God, trusting God even when it must have seemed crazy. On his journey to Jesse's home Samuel must have been thinking back over all the times God had already been his good and faithful shepherd: God had caused Samuel to be born to Hannah, who had been unable to have children (1 Sam. 1). God had called Samuel by name to be a prophet and leader of God's people (1 Sam. 3). God had led the Israelite army to victory against the Philistines, and Samuel had been there serving as their priest (1 Sam. 7). And perhaps Samuel thought back on all God's faithfulness to the people of Israel: leading them out of slavery in Egypt; leading them into the

promised land. These memories could have served as reminders, as a foundation to support Samuel's faith in a difficult, trying moment.

*The Lord has been our shepherd.
The Lord has been my shepherd.
The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not be in want.*

*Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil;
For you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.*

Looking back on God's faithfulness would have helped Samuel to see God being faithful to him in his present moment. He would have remembered that the same God who had been with him and his people for so long, who had guided them and protected them, was there with him on that strange and dangerous journey to anoint a new king. He would have had faith that God would still be with him after the journey and the anointing, come what may.

Of course I don't know what Samuel actually prayed or thought on his way to Jesse's home. But whatever his prayer was, it helped keep him moving forward through a time of doubt and fear.

I think people (myself included) tend to look back on prophets and saints and other "special" people of God and assume that somehow they were more certain than us "regular" people. They were more sure of God's guidance; they had a greater sense of clarity; they had miraculously less doubt and fear and confusion. It's especially easy to assume that for stories like Samuel's, where the biblical accounts seem to tell us that Samuel and God were exchanging audible words, that God was speaking loudly and clearly to Samuel in a way in which we long to hear from God.

But many of the people we hold up as special saints admitted feeling doubt and fear and frustration, admitted feeling like God was silent or maybe even absent.

Many of us admire the pastor and scholar Dietrich Bonhoeffer for the faithful life he lived. He chose to stay in Germany during Hitler's reign there, though he could have stayed in the U.S. or England or any number of safer places. He spoke out publicly against Nazi takeover of the church. When the Nazis suppressed the church that spoke out against them, Bonhoeffer worked underground to train students of the faith. He worked as a spy. After he was caught, he spent a year and half in prison, where he ministered to the other prisoners and continued his writing. He was executed along with fellow conspirators. The story of Bonhoeffer's death, passed on by a physician who had been an eyewitness, sounds like something out of an ancient book of saints:

I saw Pastor Bonhoeffer... kneeling on the floor praying fervently to God. I was most deeply moved by the way this lovable man prayed, so devout and so certain that God heard his prayer. At the place of execution, he again said a short prayer and then climbed the few steps to the gallows, brave and composed. His death ensued after a

few seconds. In the almost fifty years that I worked as a doctor, I have hardly ever seen a man die so entirely submissive to the will of God.¹

Bonhoeffer is a renowned example of inspiring faith and action in the midst of terrible times. But Bonhoeffer's outward faith emerged from a storm of inner struggle and doubt. While imprisoned, he wrote this poem about the difference between how other people saw him and how he experienced his own life:

*Who am I? They often tell me
I would step from my cell's confinement
calmly, cheerfully, firmly,
like a squire from his country-house.*

*Who am I? They often tell me
I would talk to my warders
freely and friendly and clearly,
as though it were mine to command.*

*Who am I? They also tell me
I would bear the days of misfortune
equably, smilingly, proudly,
like one accustomed to win.*

*Am I then really all that which other men tell of?
Or am I only what I know of myself,
restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage,
struggling for breath, as though hands were compressing my throat,
yearning for colours, for flowers, for the voices of birds,
thirsting for words of kindness, for neighborliness,
trembling with anger at despotisms and petty humiliation,
tossing in expectation of great events,
powerlessly trembling for friends at an infinite distance,
weary and empty at praying, at thinking, at making,
faint, and ready to say farewell to it all?*

*Who am I? This or the other?
Am I one person today, and tomorrow another?
Am I both at once? A hypocrite before others,
and before myself a contemptibly weebegone weakling?
Or is something within me still like a beaten army,
fleeing in disorder from victory already achieved?*

*Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.
Whoever I am, thou knowest, O God, I am thine.²*

¹ Bethge, Eberhard. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*. Quoted in the Wikipedia article "Dietrich Bonhoeffer." https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dietrich_Bonhoeffer

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer. *Letters and Papers from Prison* (Enlarged Edition). Ed. Eberhard Bethge. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1972). pp. 347-348.

Bonhoeffer, like other remarkable saints, experienced the feelings familiar to us: loneliness, helplessness, fear, second-guessing. But still he and the other saints threw themselves on God: remembering God's faithfulness to their ancestors in the faith, remembering God's past faithfulness to them, they opened their eyes to find God's faithfulness even in the darkest of times. Praying until they trusted more, praying in a way that kept them walking with God and trying to be part of God's work in world.

Bonhoeffer wrote these words as part of a prayer for himself and other prisoners:

O God, early in the morning I cry to you. Help me to pray and to concentrate my thoughts on you; I cannot do this alone. In me there is darkness, but with you there is light; I am lonely, but you do not leave me; I am feeble in heart, but with you there is help; I am restless, but with you there is peace. In me there is bitterness, but with you there is patience; I do not understand your ways, but you know the way for me...Lord Jesus Christ, you were poor and in distress, a captive and forsaken as I am. You know all man's troubles; you abide with me when all men fail me...Lord, I hear your call and follow; help me...O Holy Spirit, give me faith that will protect me from despair, from passions, and from vice...Restore me to liberty, and enable me so to live now that I may answer before you and before men. Lord whatever this day may bring, your name be praised. Amen.³

When we gather for worship, one of the things we do is call to mind God's faithfulness to our ancestors in the faith. We do this when we read the Bible, when we sing hymns, when we give thanks for our baptism, and when we celebrate Holy Communion. We remember in order to give thanks to God, but we also remember so we can hear that God's faithfulness continues down through the generations and into our own lives. We remember so that our eyes will be opened to see God's faithfulness to us now.

When you go through your own hard times, practice remembering God's faithfulness to you and to others. Call to mind your favorite Bible stories or verses. Remember how God has worked in the lives of those you love. Remember the ways you have experienced God at work in your own life. Remind yourself of who God is, and then in prayer practice trusting God, even in the times it feels hard to do so. Maybe through that practice, you will come to see the goodness of God even in those hard times.

The Lord has been our shepherd.
The Lord is our shepherd.
The Lord will be our shepherd.
Amen. Thanks be to God.

³Bonhoeffer, 139-141.