

Sermon, Father William J. Albinger

July 5, 2009

Proper 9B 2009

In the name of our one living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

In our reading today from Second Samuel, we continue with the epic David narrative. Here we find all the tribes of Israel coming to David at his home in Hebron acknowledging their kinship with him. They acknowledge his military prowess under Saul and that he is God's favored who shall be "shepherd of my people Israel." The elders of the tribes arrive and enter covenant with David and anoint him king. At age thirty he has consolidated his power, is crowned king and begins his forty-year reign.

Going from last week's reading from second Samuel to this week's, one would think David's ascension to the throne was a walk in the park. But read the complete story and you will see that a major civil war preceded his coronation. It was a time of bloody battles between relatives and much intrigue and murder. I had to ask myself what does this say about human political power? David at age thirty achieves top dog status. Despite personal failures and a dysfunctional personal life, he will lead Israel over forty years to the greatest political and military strength in its history.

The reign of David was etched onto Israel's corporate memory as it's Golden Era - when things were the way they were supposed to be; so, obviously, it is the way God wants things to be. David thus becomes the icon of what the arrival of the Messiah will be like. To some Christians he still is superimposed on the Jesus of the Gospels.

Our Gospel lesson gives us a picture of Jesus fairly early in his ministry. He had been going about the rural parts of Galilee teaching and healing and doing remarkable acts of power. He had even gone over to the other side of the Sea of Galilee - to the gentile side - and had cured a demoniac driving out legions of evil spirits that enslaved him, made him so out of control that he had to be restrained. When he returned to his people's side, large

crowds greeted him and he was able to heal and give new life to all- to rich and poor, to the powerful and to those rejected by the society.

Now, Jesus leaves that place and returns with his disciples to his hometown. He probably needed a rest in familiar surroundings amidst his old neighbors. Since we know that not much goes on in rural communities that doesn't get reported, we can well imagine that word of Jesus' actions and the crowds that surrounded him must have found its way back to Nazareth. On the Sabbath, he teaches in the synagogue and Mark tells us "many who heard him were astounded." That word can mean wonderment and being amazed or it could mean confounded by something that doesn't measure up or conform to what we expect or know. It seems the first meaning quickly gave way to the second. They had Jesus pegged. They knew him and his family. What they heard from him and others didn't conform to their knowledge and expectations and they "took offense with him." Jesus responded with a proverb that prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown and among family and kin.

Jesus must have been a quick strategist. He realized that his message would never be received if he sat in synagogues among people who already had clear ideas about how God's power should work in the world. He knew had had been right all along by going out to the people who needed to hear the good news and were able to hear it because they had no vested interest in what others thought they already knew. To expand his reach into the community, he deputizes his disciples and shares with them his powers to heal and give hope and new life to all who would hear. There is urgency to his ministry now. He tells them not to waste time getting comfortable and not to waste time with those who would reject the Gospel.

These lessons show a contrast between the political power of David and the power of Jesus. At 30 a believing public is crowning David king because of his military power. Jesus at age 30 is being rejected by the knowledgeable because he certainly wasn't the Messiah they expected and the kingdom Jesus offered wasn't anything compared to Da-

vid's.

These lessons point out to me that divine power works differently from our human expectations. God, it seems, has different eyes that see us differently from how we see one another or ourselves. Have you ever been diminished and denied opportunity because your talent or passion didn't conform to the expectations others had of you? A harder question: have you ever ignored or even belittled someone else because their hopes and plans did not conform to your expectations of them? I think we all can probably say yes to both.

I know I can say "yes" both. Sometimes it is my own personal views that get in the way of being able to see and be open to new possibilities. More often it is what I was taught to expect or to believe that got in my way of seeing things the way they truly are or the way God would like them to be. Over the years I have learned to see many things differently, to see that God may not have the same vested interest that others have in preserving the way things are. Some people are better at that than others. But I will tell you that it helps if you have experienced others having expectations or opinions which in no way reflect the reality of your own life or your abilities and dreams. The Gospel of Jesus Christ gives people the faith and courage to acknowledge that fact, to reject the erroneous opinions others may have of them and to work for change.

The synagogue leaders of Nazareth were expecting a Messiah like David and saw in Jesus only weakness. They had no need of him. No wonder Jesus could do no works in the midst of rejection. The crowds had no expectations and lived lives of little or no hope. In Jesus' embracing acceptance they experienced healing and found hope. They found in him divine power. As Paul noted, God sees the perfection of power in weakness.

There are a lot of people, especially religious people, who are like the people in the synagogue in Nazareth and see the power of God through the lens of a Davidic kingly Messiah. A savior who comes in might from the skies to exercise coercive power with military

might. And there are many more who look only to the institutional church and tradition and fail to see the power of God working in our own times. We church people are also guilty of the “familiarity breeds contempt” blindness and fail to see God’s power and love speaking to us through the most unlikely people. We have our own vested interests and expectations about people and issues. We are discomforted when our expectations are challenged by the people unlike us. Perhaps those people are sent by God to do just that!

Many church people urge us to isolate ourselves from the unbelievers “out there” and live within a community of likeminded people. There’s a group of clergy here on Maui who proudly call themselves the “wall builders”. But I would this Episcopal Church and our parish to reject that impulse. What did Jesus do? Not only did he go out to where the people were, but he sent out his disciples out to them with his power to teach and heal. He didn’t go out to “grow the church”; he went out to show them the love, hope and new life that God brings to us – a power that can transform lives and communities.

I would like that to be part of the strategic plan of the church. Ministry is best done by disciples going outside the church, one on one, telling of what belief in God has done for their lives. To do that, we have to be willing to see people through God’s eyes and not our own preconceptions or expectations.

As St. Francis said, “Preach always and when absolutely necessary, use words.” Or as one of my seminary professors once said, “Your life may be the only Bible some people will read.” Program doesn’t welcome people – people welcome people and then program happens in response to human needs. David’s kingdom lasted two generations. Jesus’ kingdom is still here with and within us.

Amen.