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Christmas Courage

1 Samuel 27:1-3

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This Christmas Eve I'd like to look at an episode in the life of David that we find in 1 Samuel 27:1-3. If you have your Bibles, open them and follow along with me:

Then David said in his heart, "Now I shall perish one day by the hand of Saul. There is nothing better for me than that I should escape to the land of the Philistines. Then Saul will despair of seeking me any longer within the borders of Israel, and I shall escape out of his hand." So David arose and went over, he and the six hundred men who were with him, to Achish the son of Maach, king of Gath. And David lived with Achish at Gath, he and his men, every man with his household.

This happened during the time that David was a fugitive in Israel. Saul was still sitting on the throne. Saul was the first king of Israel, but when he broke God's Law – when he decided to take the priest's place and make a sacrifice on the altar himself – God rejected him as King and sent the prophet Samuel to the town of Bethlehem – to what was later known as the City of David – to find and anoint a new king.

As the Bible tells us, Samuel went to Bethlehem and to the house of Jesse. And when he got there he asked Jesse to parade all of his sons in front of him. And as they all filed past Samuel shook his head at each one, saying, "No, this isn't the one." The youngest son, David, was still out tending his father's sheep. But when he came, Samuel recognized him as God's chosen king. Samuel anointed David's head with oil and proclaimed him, by God's authority, the new king. And yet Saul continued to reign.

Consider these two kings: contrast Saul and David. Scripture tells us that Saul was a giant of a man – taller than all the other men of Israel – and I think God gives us that detail for a reason, as we'll see in a bit. He carried a giant spear with him – even next to him when he was in his throne room. It was huge and it was symbol of his power and authority as the king of Israel. And yet for all his size, Saul was a coward. We all know the story of David when he went to visit his

brothers when they were camped with the army on the frontier, fighting the Philistines. And the Philistines had a giant with them. The Hebrew text says that Goliath was about nine-and-a-half feet tall. The Greek text says he was six-and-a-half, which is probably the more accurate reading, but no less intimidating to the men of those days. Sure the Philistines had a giant, but the Israelites had Saul, who was taller than all the men of Israel. He probably wasn't much shorter than Goliath. Two giants squared off. And yet Saul and his army were afraid of to go up against the Philistine giant, who knew the Israelites were afraid, and would come out every day and taunt them.

And then young David showed up and saw the Israelite army cowering. He was disgusted. Saul had promised riches and marriage to his daughter to the man who would kill Goliath. And David looks around at the cowering soldiers and asks if that's all they're concerned about: money and a girl as a reward. He says, what about the fact that this guy's defying, mocking, and shaming the army of God himself. "Who is this uncircumcised Philistine, that he should defy the armies of the living God?" he asks. "Who's this gentile dirtbag who dares to defy God and *why* are you guys afraid of him?" is basically what he's asking.

And we all know what happened. David went toe-to-toe with Goliath – shepherd's slingshot against a spear the size of a weaver's beam. And David took down the giant. But it was no surprise to David. You see, he knew God's promises. He trusted in the living God. He wasn't afraid. And he did what he had to be done – and God took care of the situation.

Saul took David into his own household and David became a great general for the Israelite army. But pretty soon, David was outshining Saul. The people of Israel were singing in the streets about Saul killing his thousands and David killing his *tens* of thousands. David was being and doing everything Saul was supposed to but wasn't. And Saul, in his jealousy, sought to kill David. And so David spends the first several years of his life with Saul on the run. Twice David could have killed Saul, and yet David said it wasn't his place to harm God's anointed. The first time Saul stumbled into a cave where David and his men were hiding. In the dark we was oblivious to David's presence, so David cut a piece of Saul cloak to take to him as evidence: "Saul, why do you have it in for me? See, I could have killed you, but I didn't." The second time, David and his buddy Abishai sneaked into Saul's camp. They sneaked into his tent and while he lay there sleeping with his giant

spear next to him, Abishai whispered to David, "He's fast asleep. Why don't you let me pin him to the ground with his own spear. [Remember Saul's giant spear that was always with him?] One blow and it's all over, David." But again, David warns Abishai and says, "No. Who can put his hand against the Lord's anointed and be guiltless. As the Lord lives, his day will come. The Lord will strike him. Eventually he'll die or he'll fall in battle, but the Lord forbid that I take his life with my hand."

David just wanted to be reconciled to Saul, so he and Abishai stole Saul's big spear and they stole his chamber pot. They ran out of the camp and up the hillside. And when they were out of the camp, they called down, waking up Saul and his men. And David waved the spear and the chamber pot so Saul could see them. He asked Saul why he had it in for him and reminded him again that he had nothing against him. "I could have killed you again, but I didn't." In both cases where David spared Saul, the king made his apology to David, but both times it wasn't long before Saul was after him again. But David understood: it wasn't his place to take the life of God's anointed. When the time was right, God himself would take care of Saul.

And there's only one reason why David could be so confident that God would take care of the problem. He remembered that day when the prophet Samuel was led to him by God, poured oil on his head, and anointed him king of Israel by God's authority. David had God's promise and so he had no problem telling Abishai, "God will take care of Saul."

Now this has all just happened in Chapter 26. But Chapter 27 begins with those words: "Then David said in his heart, 'Now I shall perish one day by the hand of Saul.'" The text doesn't say how much time passed in between, but based on the arrangement, it seems pretty obvious that whomever wrote the text wanted these two events closely connected. Here's the man ordained by God to be the next king, who just before this has put his trust confidently in God – here's the man who wrote so many of the great Psalms of faith in the Almighty – and yet here he suddenly fears his own death at the hands of his enemy. Here's God's anointed running off in fear for his life. And he doesn't just run and hide from Saul. *He runs to the pagan Philistines* – the greatest enemy of Israel there was in that day. And he doesn't just run to the pagan Philistines. There were five great cities in Philistia. David runs to the city of Gath. And that ought to sound familiar. Remember Goliath. He was known as Goliath the giant, but he was also

known as Goliath of *Gath*. David take his family and his six hundred warriors, and he runs and hides in the most despicable place imaginable. Think back. When Goliath was taunting the Israelite army and David showed up. He was disgusted with the men and asked them, “Why do you let this *uncircumcised Philistine* mock and shame the army of the living God? *Uncircumcised* was about the worst insult he could use – it summed up everything it meant to be outside of God’s grace: a pagan barbarian. And yet now in his fear, David runs and takes refuge in the shelter of Achish, the prince of Gath. And not only that: he spends the next year or two working as a hired thug for Maach, the king of Gath, raiding the surrounding countryside – raiding his own people!

David had just experienced divine deliverance from his enemy. He rejoices and his faith lasts for all of *fifteen minutes*. Then he says, “I shall perish one day by the hand of Saul. *There is nothing better for me than that I should escape to the land of the Philistines.*” Let me repeat that: “*There is nothing better than that I should escape to the Land of the Philistines.*”

David had more than one low point in his life. We probably think of his great sin with Bathsheba, when he committed adultery with her and then had her husband murdered – we think of that as his great low point. But let me suggest that this was probably even lower. Here was the man whom we’re told had a heart after God’s own heart. Here we have a man anointed by God to be the king of Israel. Here we have a man to whom *God had made a promise*. And yet he loses his faith and spends the next couple of years being the *exact opposite* of what God had called him to be. *Because he had forgotten God’s call. Because he had forgotten God’s anointing. Because he had forgotten, most importantly, God’s promise.*

Now you might ask: “What does this have to do with Christmas?” Well, it has a lot to do with Christmas, because David’s fear and lack of faith in God’s promise isn’t just David’s problem. It’s our problem too. *If you are a Christian, if you are a follower of Christ, and if you have put your faith and trust in him as Saviour, then God has called you, God has anointed you, and God has made a promise to you.* We read earlier in the lesson from St. John’s Gospel:

But to all who did receive him [that’s Jesus Christ], who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and

dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:12-14)

The Christmas message is that God came to reconcile sinful men and women to himself – but not just to forgive them their sins through the death of his own Son. Jesus Christ came not just to impart to us his own righteousness – the righteousness that we can never have on our own – so that we can stand before our Holy Father uncondemned. He came to impart to us his grace and to give us the gift of his Holy Spirit. Why? That we might become like him. God’s call to us is to be like his Son that we might glorify him by living righteous and holy lives and by sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ with others – not only in word, but in action. And his promise to us is his gift of grace that makes us able to live that calling. His promise to us is that though the battle may rage here on earth as we struggle against the world, the flesh, and the devil, he will one day take us home to be with him.

Revelation 21 paints a picture of life in the New Jerusalem – the consummation of our new life in Jesus Christ. St. John gives us a vivid picture of the grandeur of God’s kingdom. He gives us hope saying that there will be no more darkness, and no more tears, and no more death.

That’s the consummation of God’s promise to us: the end of sin and death and our finally being perfected in our righteousness. But as St. John is shown the New Jerusalem, Jesus also tells him who *won’t* be there. And he gives John a list of all sorts of gross sin: “murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars.” And we think, yeah, those are pretty big sins. But you know what two sins start that list? The list starts with the cowardly and the faithless. *The cowardly and the faithless.* There’s no excuse for Christians to live in fear! David fell into sin more than once – and they were some big ones – but his greatest sin and his lowest spiritual point came when he feared Saul and ran to hide with the enemies of the people of God. And he did that because he forgot the promise of God.

And we’re prone to doing the same thing. God calls his people to a life of *courageous* living. And yet we fear the consequences of living out his principles in our lives. We fear that if we take a stand for his Truth we may offend our family or our friends. We fear that if we take a stand for righteousness it might cost us our job. We fear that if we take a stand for the Gospel of Jesus Christ we might lose our dignity. We fear that if

we hand over our all to the work of God we might be left destitute. As Christians we’re frequently doing exactly what David did: we fear the battle because we’ve forgotten God’s call and his promise, and so we run off to hide in Gath with the Philistines.

But we have no reason to fear...because it’s Christmas! Once again we have the annual reminder that the Word of God became incarnate – became one of us – so that he could die the death we deserved and reconcile us to God. At Christmas we’re reminded of the power and authority that stand behind our baptism. God Incarnate coming to redeem sinful men and women so that they might become the adopted sons and daughters of God! Christmas reminds us that our heavenly Father has made the down payment. Christmas is the yearly reminder as we fight the battle and wait for the coming consummation of our redemption that though our enemy may be mightier than we are, just as Goliath was so much mightier than David, our defender and champion is God himself! That’s the Good News. As the angels proclaimed to the shepherds: “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord.”

*If you are in Jesus Christ – if you have ceased to trust in your own goodness, your own works, your own righteousness to find God’s favour, and if you if you have put your trust in Jesus Christ, making him your Lord: *fear not!* God has called you. God has anointed you. God has given you his promise. Those whom God has redeemed by becoming one of us – being born in the lowly manger and dying on the lowly cross – are called to live out the Good News of the Gospel with courage. Because, as St. Paul wrote for us: “If God be for us, who can be against us?”*

Please pray with me: Almighty God, who gave your only Son to take our nature upon him and to be born of a pure virgin, grant that we, who are born again in him and made your children by adoption and grace, may daily be renewed by your Holy Spirit through our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.