

II Samuel 5:1-10  
Duke Chapel  
July 8, 2012

### Once Upon a Time

- Once upon a time...
- Or maybe this is more your style—A long time ago, in a galaxy far far away...
- Or perhaps for the literary among us, this suits our tastes better—Sing in me, Muse, and through me tell the story...

We can choose our favorite opening line because in any of these and many others, we recognize the formula for a tale of meaning and majesty. Here is the opening line for today:

All the tribes of Israel came to David at Hēbron...

Like any good story involving people, there's background for this one. The background goes way back to the earliest promises about living on the land. Turns out Jacob's children, now known as Israel, the ancestor and his children, have been working their way back to this land where David now stands for more years than anyone can count.

You know the story: God promised all the land to Abraham, Jacob's grandfather, and then some jealous brothers, Jacob's children, sold their dandy brother, Joseph, to some traders headed east. Next they broke their father's heart by returning home with Joseph's soiled and bloodied cloak of many colors—or long sleeves if you're a literalist—inferring to Jacob that Joseph is dead. Lucky for them he wasn't dead and also lucky for them, he ended up in

Egypt where he was soon in charge of that life saving grain provided for all those naughty brothers a few years later when famine settled over their own land—this land where David is now standing—and they all had to move to Egypt for a few generations.

Alas, a Pharaoh arose in Egypt who knew not Joseph and enslaved those children of Israel. It took Moses with a bushel of miracles provided by God to get them out of there and forty years for them to make it back to the riverside overlooking the promised land. A succession of judges appointed to sort out disputes and negotiate treaties, culminated finally in the reign of King Saul. Not the most successful monarch in the history of the world, but the first king of Israel, soon supplanted by the best king of Israel, King David.

Now we're talking. That's when life was good. After all those broken promises, all that wandering, all those faltering leaders, we finally had a ruler who knew how to get things done. When David was in charge, the land flowed with milk and honey. When David was in charge the River Jordan was deep and wide. That was a king after God's own heart. David reigned 40 years.

We don't need a Sunday School teacher to point out the significance of 40 to our faith.

- 40 days and nights of rain for Noah yields a new promise from God.
- 40 years in the wilderness for Israel brings them to this promised land.
- 40 days in the wilderness for Jesus solidifies the claims on his life.
- 40 matters to our faith. When we hear 40, it means: Listen up.

David reigned 40 years. We ought to hear that statement with all the reverence and reminiscing it implies. Sighs of contentment, shouts of joy, expressions of peace. Oh times were good then. Don't you know it. Oh Zion, we remember thee...

A few years ago the church where I grew up celebrated one of its anniversaries. As part of the celebration they asked the half dozen or so of us who are in fulltime ministry to write a reflection piece on our time growing up in that place. It's a young congregation by most accounts, not quite forty, but I was only 14 when I joined up. The past I recall comes through rose-colored glasses even while I know the truth to be a bit more jaded.

Take the fact that our high school Sunday School class had no classroom. We met under a magnolia tree beside the parking lot, but that only worked if the weather cooperated. Funny how I don't remember all the Sunday mornings when it was too cold, too hot, too wet to sit under that tree. I just remember the tree, my good friends, our beloved teachers. My Zion—a place where all the women are strong, all the men are good looking, and all the children are above average. Such a place nestled in upstate South Carolina.

Most of us have a Zion place, not fictitious like Lake Wobegon. But real, like the church that raised me. Maybe it's the church that raised you. Maybe it's this church. Maybe it's not a church at all, but a house where our grandparents always welcomed us with fresh baked cookies and endless games of go-fish. It might be a vacation spot frequented by our families until we became the rebellious teenagers who scoffed at something so quaint as a family vacation. Maybe it's a team we played on or play we acted in, some point in our lives when time and place were the way we imagine life is meant to be.

In truth, Zion is mostly memory. It's what we've made over time of the place, hence my rose-colored glasses when remembering Sunday School under the magnolia tree. Yes, we did have Sunday School under a magnolia tree—that was real. But sometimes we didn't; sometimes we huddled at the end of a hallway; sometimes our teacher called in sick; sometimes we overslept and missed the whole thing. The danger of Zion memories is we spend all our time in the present looking back at a partial past and never bother to live into the full future.

Usually about the first month of the spring semester, seniors I've been meeting with all year long start to worry about their future. They worry about the things you'd expect—grad school, jobs, student loans—but they worry just as much about graduating out of the faith community that's been central to their college experience. "Life after Wesley," they call it. And they want me to tell them where to find the same things they've found in the Duke Wesley Fellowship. My colleagues in ministry can tell the same story about their students graduating out of the Newman Center, Westminster, or Pathways.

I can tell my students are pretty skeptical about the possibilities ahead of them and they're already lapsing into reminiscent mode. Ah college, the best years of our lives. That was a place flowing with milk and honey; that was a river deep and wide; that's where all the children were above average. There'll never be another group that's... what? This much fun? This faithful? This comforting? This edgy? I like to think we're edgy. Each student has his or her favorite characteristic of our faith community and is convinced it exists nowhere else in creation.

Now, we're good; don't get me wrong—we've won national awards, received grants. Our students have preached from this pulpit on student preacher Sunday four out of the last ten years—an average envied by baseball players everywhere. But what we do in our faith community exists everywhere else, everywhere the people of God strive to live into the reign of God.

I tell these students the same thing I've told every class of seniors that came before them: If you live as though nothing will ever compare to this time and place, then nothing ever will. Better to claim that because of these experiences, this incarnation of God's presence—always particular anywhere it shows up—because of this incarnation of God's presence, there is always the possibility that God will show up. I tell them, you know what that looks like. You've already seen it. It is a great, great gift, squandered if we only think about it in retrospect. So, go out there and live into the reign of God. God's got more staying power than our four years of college or even David's 40 years as King of Israel. The Zion years move with us into the present helping us claim God's possibilities for the future.

This past Wednesday was July the 4<sup>th</sup>; reminiscing writ large. It's not lost on me that this is probably the most important national holiday Americans have; it's certainly been around the longest, if we date it from 1776. And we have all our halcyon stories to accompany this hallowed date. Zion images:

- There's the ride of Paul Revere and his famous cry: one if by land, two if by sea.
- Remember Betsy Ross stitching the first stars and stripes together from scrapes in her sewing basket.
- Or the picture of George Washington crossing the Delaware—oil on canvas.

- In my home state we know Washington would never have prevailed at Yorktown without Daniel Morgan's victory at Cowpens. That's the only reason Cornwallis left South Carolina and headed back toward Virginia where Washington trapped him and won the war. So, you can thank South Carolina for the United States of America. See how these stories work?

All these stories, sort of true, helpfully embellished, call forth the best from us, just as they do from Israel when they remember Moses, Joshua, David.

- This is when we knew who we were and the Lord, the God of hosts, was with us.
- This is when the land flowed with milk and honey; the River Jordan was deep and wide.
- This is when we welcomed the sojourner, sometimes we call them immigrants.
- This is when we fed the hungry, sometimes we call that food subsidies.
- This is when we healed the sick, sometimes we know that as the Affordable Care Act.

We tell these stories to each other to remind us of who we are so that we never lose sight of who we can become. For Americans, this is an election year and we find ourselves in a place that's not a whole lot different from Chapter 5 of Second Samuel. We can't pretend these things don't matter—a week ago the whole country was waiting on one ruling by the Supreme Court with the same level of anticipation we usually reserve for a major sporting event. And the result was about as polarizing as a Duke-Carolina basketball game.

Now I know the first Sunday after the 4<sup>th</sup> of July is not a liturgical date, I had that class. I teach it sometimes. But we can't pretend this day doesn't matter to us just because we're safely tucked away in a neo-gothic building. Most of us watched the fireworks on Wed, some of us ate bar-b-que, the luckiest among us had peach cobbler. When the fireworks end and the cobbler's gone, we still remember a story that makes us feel proud—Paul Revere, Betsy Ross, and all the rest. Maybe we recall our favorite administration and wish we could chose one of those presidential candidates. But we can't and truth be told, those revered leaders couldn't handle these events anyway.

Those people handled the dilemmas of those days the best they could with the resources they had. And most of us were just as unsure about those events while we were in the middle of them as we are unsure about Barak Obama or Mitt Romney in the middle of these days. In the present it does not serve us well to sit around and pine for the way we were. We do best to think about how we want to get to the place where God is out front ready to meet us in God's good future.

If we want to know what that future can look like, we might refer to stories like Daniel Morgan routing the Red Coats and weakening the resistance to Washington at Yorktown, but remember after Cornwallis surrendered it took less than a hundred years for my Sandlapper ancestors to fire on a federal fort and start a new war between brothers. We can talk about David securing the City of Zion and uniting the Kingdom of Israel where he ruled for 40 years, but we also know that 2 generations later that united kingdom split in two, never to recover even to this day.

In these stories we learn something important about ourselves, but it turns out the epic of salvation history, epitomized in these grand narratives, is not really about us at all. We've got the whole equation backwards when we think our faith is about us. How much I believe, how much I pray, how much I give. How spiritual I am, how devout I am, how socially conscious I am. All these verbs and adjectives we claim as descriptions for our relationship with God, relationships that always start with me... We think this story about David is a nostalgic look back to a time of glory and fame, but it's not. It's a call forward to a truth that defines God's future, a future that we are called to live into by believing that the world revolves around God.

The 40 days it rained on Noah's ark is not about Noah or the ark.

The 40 years of wandering in the wilderness is not about Moses or the Hebrews.

The 40 days that Jesus waited in the wild place is not about either Jesus or Satan.

It's about God.

The story is told to us, not about us. The story is offered for us, not from us.

The story is not recited to be recreated. The story is open ended so that we might become a part of it and move forward with it into the future. The story tells us who we are called to be.

At the end of the day, I don't want to go back and have Sunday School under a magnolia tree. It's going to be 212 degrees outside today; who could possibly want to be outside? And a year or two after they graduate, alumni return to tell me they don't need to come back and crowd into a basement office for Weekly



Eucharist to understand the bread of life and the cup of salvation. They have mastered that subject. They take it with them everywhere they go, not by remembering a partial past, but by claiming a full future.

Once upon a time: all the tribes of Israel came to David at Hebron. They didn't exactly live happily ever after, but they have passed on to us how to live faithfully ever after. Along with all the faithful who followed them, we are now in line to live faithfully ever after, not by pining for the past, but by facing the future in the sure and certain truth, that is where we will meet God. Thanks be to God who calls us forward in faith. Amen.