

Motive, Means, and Opportunity

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

September 29, 2024 AM Sermon

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1 Samuel 24:1-22

Last Sunday, Reverend Jonker preached from 1 Samuel 18 and we began to see the tightening grasp of envy on Saul's heart as his hostility increased toward David. This morning our passage is from 1 Samuel 24. Saul's budding envy is now in full murderous bloom. David is on the run. Saul has tried to get David killed at the hands of the Philistines (chapter 18), he has commanded his attendants and Jonathan to kill David. Saul himself has tried to kill David by hurling a spear at him (chapter 19) and he has even gone to hunt David down in his own home. But David has escaped each time. In this morning's passage, we find David and his band of followers in the wilderness. Listen to 1 Samuel 24.

They're an excellent place for hiding out, these caves of En Gedi. Rising 2000 feet from the desert floor, the cliffs are well-suited for wild goats and hyenas. But today they're the place of a remarkable encounter between two of God's chosen kings. Today they're the place of testing and discerning God's will. Today they're the place where guilt and goodness are acknowledged.

David and his 600 men have hidden out in this wilderness oasis. Saul and his chosen soldiers outnumber David's group 5 to 1 and they are on the hunt, relying on the best intelligence, turning over every rock and scaling every wall to seek out David to destroy him.

David and his men are tucked deep into a cave. Some are dozing; others inventory supplies. Suddenly a shadow falls over the cave's entrance. The lookout signals for quiet as the sound of crunching gravel grows louder. Clank, go the cast-off weapons. Thwap, goes the outer robe. The men within earshot freeze. The lookout tiptoes forward. He peeks around a bend in the cave to see a man with his back to him. Out here the shelter of a cave is the best place, yes, you guessed it to do one's business.

But wait....is that...? The sentry catches his breath. That guy is TALL. It sure looks like.... It is! That guy literally caught with his pants down is King Saul himself! What an opportunity! What a golden moment! The lookout scuttles off to David. It could all end now; the miserable, desperate game of cat-and-mouse that has become the bane of David's existence and the animating purpose of Saul's.

Like a game of telephone, the news spreads, astonishment lighting up the faces of the men. "This can mean only one thing!" They tell David. "This is God's will! Today is the day the Lord spoke of when he said to you, I will give your enemy into your hands for you to deal with as you wish."

So David retraces the lookout's steps to find a still occupied Saul. David draws his sword and pads forward, comes up behind his mortal enemy, lifts his arm and ... slices off a piece of Saul's robe. Eyes grow wide and the men exchange looks. What is he doing? He knows about eye for eye and tooth for tooth, life for life! This is God's avenging moment! But David steps back into the shadows, staring at the robe fragment in his hand. And Saul gets up and goes on his way, none the wiser about his close shave.

Remember that Saul has tried to kill David at least a handful of times at this point; and Saul's envy has resulted in the slaughter of a whole town of people. So David has plenty of motive; some might even argue responsibility to take Saul out before he does more damage. And David has means: the element of surprise, a weapon in hand, and backup forces in the recesses of the cave. David also has opportunity, an unparalleled opportunity, one his men believe to be in accord with the will of God himself.

But David chooses a different path. He does not lift his sword against King Saul. Why? Does David catch the whiff of the oil running down his head when Samuel anointed him? Does he remember the promise of God's presence and particular purpose through his life? Do Jonathan's words echo in his ears, telling him not to be afraid, confidently assuring him that Saul would not kill him, and that David would indeed one day be king?

David looks at the frayed fabric in his hands. And his conscience starts talking; literally, the text says, his "heart" struck him. That tight squeeze in his chest, more than the thoughts in his head, alerts him to something.

What has he just done? Has he really come within inches of laying a hand on the king? And the enormity of that other outcome hits him like a brick.

For Saul, increasingly warped vessel that he is, is not just any enemy. He remains God's anointed, God's chosen instrument. God has given and called Saul to Israel for his own purposes to show God's rule and life to the people of Israel. Though David cannot trust Saul ever again, Saul's anointing is a plain fact. It's God-given and it must be God-revoked. Through Samuel, God has indeed informed Saul that the kingdom will be taken away from him to be given to one "after his own heart" (1 Samuel 13:14). But the timing and circumstances are up to God, not David.

So David says to his men: "God forbid that I should raise my hand against the Lord's anointed and, by the way, don't you do it either." David lets Saul get a safe distance away and then shouts after him, bowing in honor, protesting his innocence, entering the scrap of robe as evidence exhibit A. "This day you have seen with your own eyes how the LORD delivered you into my hands in the cave," David testifies. "Some urged me to kill you, but I spared you; I said, 'I will not lay my hand on my lord, because he is the LORD's anointed.... As the old saying goes, 'From evildoers come evil deeds,' so my hand will not touch you.'" (verses 10,13)

So David hangs onto his convictions about anointing: only God has the authority to raise up kings; and only God has the authority to cast them down. It will not do for David's own future reign, or the future of Israel as a whole, to have the second king of Israel usurp God's authority by killing the first king.

And notice that it's crucial for DAVID's sake that he cooperates with God's purposes. For the sake of who David is becoming in his life with God, he needs to exercise gut-and-heart level trust in God, not live under the power of fear or vengeance. He refuses to rush his term as king by taking it on by his own hands.

With motive, means, and opportunity all aligned, David rejects the power grab and extends mercy; this for someone who justly deserves the opposite. Contrary to his men's convictions, he discerns the will of God is not to take out his rival. Instead he trusts God's promises, and he trusts God's long work to bring those promises to fruition. David's way will not be the way of the clenched fist; at least not for today. His way will be the way of the open hand, receiving the kingship at the time chosen by God.

And Saul responds not with assurance of safety, mind you, but with an acknowledgement of David's generosity and an affirming public word of David's future rule: "You are more righteous than I," he says. "You have treated me well, but I have treated you badly. You have just now told me about the good you did to me; the LORD delivered me into your hands, but you did not kill me. When a man finds his enemy, does he let him get away unharmed? May the LORD reward you well for the way you treated me today. I know that you will surely be king (1 Samuel 24:17-20)

It's not hard to imagine some of David's men, a few years out from this episode and still on the run, wondering whether David made a good choice in the cave that day. Saul got to go home that day back to civilization, family, and comfort. David, on the other hand, spends long years of his life between his anointing and being crowned king on the run from Saul. Wilderness years. Was the way of mercy and openhandedness worth the cost of the wilderness years?

C.S. Lewis would say yes. In *Mere Christianity* he writes, "... [E]very time you make a choice, you are turning the central part of you—the part of you that chooses—into something a little different from what it was before. And taking your life as a whole, with all your innumerable choices... you are slowly turning this central thing either into a heavenly creature or into a hellish creature: either into a creature that is in harmony with God and other creatures, and with itself, or else into one that is in a state of war and hatred with God, and with its fellow creatures and with itself. To be the one kind of creature is heaven.... To be the other means madness, horror, idiocy, rage, impotence, and eternal loneliness. Each of us at each moment is progressing to one state or the other."

The wilderness years that follow David's "no" to human power and "yes" to God's purpose and timing are heart-deepening years. David's wilderness years foster a dependence on God that doesn't come cheap. But those wilderness years carve out and give voice to the cries of the heart found in the Psalms. Those years, lifted by the Holy Spirit, inspire countless future generations to embrace faith not primarily as a matter of cognitive assent to God, but as a living trust in God's goodness and trustworthiness in all things.

David could not have known it at the time, but they are future deposits for an inheritance of faith. That faith allows David's future son Solomon to write proverbs like this: "Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it." (Proverbs 4:23)

A thousand years after David, another king rises from David's family. Jesus the Christ, meaning, Anointed. And in Jesus, the ultimate Anointed King, God gives the world a living touchpoint showing his purpose for people and creation all along. Faced with his own imminent arrest and execution in the shadows of Gethsemane, Jesus the Anointed will not seize power to reign prematurely. Instead he will go through the long wilderness of crucifixion, rebuking his followers when they raise their swords against their enemies. Jesus, the only sinless Anointed King, who has every reason and right, every holy motive, means, and opportunity to strike out against humanity in its sin and rejection of God instead provides escape into a renewed relationship bought at great cost. For he will take their justly deserved punishment on himself instead.

And after his resurrection, Jesus sends his followers out, granting them also the anointing of his Spirit, giving them power to bless even their enemies, so that they too might share something of God's love with the world. In you, in me, in us, God in Jesus is reconciling the world to himself; yes, even if that feels hard to live out and hard to see sometimes.

This week I learned a little about Uwe (Uve) Holmer, a German Lutheran pastor who worked hard to guard his heart. Holmer died about a year ago at the age of 94. But in the 1990s, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Uwe and his wife Sigrid had a decision to make. Did they take Jesus' command to love their enemies seriously? Holmer's enemy was the Communist dictator Erich Honecker. Honecker had been ruling in East Germany and was the one who had authorized the shooting of anyone who tried to escape to the west. After he was removed from power, when he was weak and fighting cancer, Honecker literally had nowhere else to go but to the people he had persecuted, the German Lutheran church. Honecker had publicly opposed Christianity, and had "personally harried and harassed" the Holmer family.

But the Holmer family had had years of practice releasing their feelings of bitterness to God. They made it a habit to forgive those who made their lives difficult. In fact, Holmer had been praying for Honecker and was worried about his soul. So when Honecker asked for help, the Holmers agreed to receive him. For ten weeks and over the protests of those around them, they cared for him and his wife in their home. In a divided Germany, the Holmers believed forgiveness and hospitality were the only way forward for treating people on "the other side." Holmer maintained that hate was "not a good starting point for a new beginning among our people."

Holmer's willingness to receive his anointing and call as a "Christian," a "little Christ" in his divided time and place speaks into our own divided time. It speaks to the depth of the soul work that we invite the Holy Spirit to do in us, crafting a people who bless rather than curse; who lift our hands to the one who saves us rather than striking out in an effort to save ourselves. We've already trusted him with all we are to save us. Each day we trust him and invite him to touch the world he loves through us.

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