

“Agony and Ecstasy”
II Samuel 1:1, 17-27
July 2, 2006
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Our lectionary texts over several weeks have focused on the story of Israel’s greatest king-- David. So far he’s been chosen, anointed, killed the giant, Goliath, and now he awaits King Saul’s impending demise before he can assume the throne. Yet, Saul’s relationship with David has been a love/hate relationship. First, David finds favor with Saul and then as David’s own popularity grows, King Saul is so jealous that he becomes self-destructive. And David has become close, intimate friends with Saul’s son, Jonathan. They love one another deeply.

Now in the throes of war both King Saul and Jonathan have been slain. The messenger who comes telling David of this news likely expected David to rejoice in his own kingship coming to fruition, but this is not what happens. Talk about shooting the messenger! Once David has been told enough of the details so that the tragedy sinks in, he goes from shock to anger, and he commands that the messenger be killed. It may seem to us that this response of David’s is an overreaction. Did *God* really want David to kill the messenger? Eugene Peterson, writer of the paraphrase of the Bible called *The Message*, says that these stories ***are immersions into the actual business of living itself; this is what it means to be human***, rather than showing us how to live, these stories show us “how in fact we *do* live.” David’s very human reaction to this cynical and opportunistic messenger, leads him to do this deed.

Through David’s beautiful, poignant, grief-laden lament upon Saul and Jonathan’s deaths we are taken into the agony of human loss, into the depths of human grief. A lesser man than David might not have dwelt on the loss of a king who had become his enemy. Yet, David shows leadership to his nation guiding them through their necessary grieving and allowing himself to be vulnerable and truthful about the magnitude of what has happened. Only after telling the truth of “how the mighty have fallen” can David move to establish a nation of strength and power. The ecstasy of Israel as a nation comes only after the agony of loss and defeat.

At the conference I attended ten days ago, I found this beautiful calligraphy that I bought to share with you today. It is a quote by Alexis de Tocqueville, a French philosopher of the 19th century. He writes:

***I sought for the greatness and genius of America in her commodious harbors and her ample rivers, and it was not there;
in her fertile fields and prairies, and it was not there;
in her rich mines and her vast world commerce, and it was not there.
Not until I went to the churches of America and heard her pulpits aflame with righteousness did I understand the secret of her genius and power.
America is great because America is good. If America ever ceases to be good, America will cease to be great.***

What words might de Tocqueville have heard from the pulpits of America? Perhaps he heard some of these most repeated words of Jesus:

From Matthew 5--

*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth,
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.
Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy,
Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.
Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.
Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

From Matthew 7--

In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.

From Matthew 19--

Then little children were being brought to him in order that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples spoke sternly to those who brought them; but Jesus said, 'Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs.'

From Matthew 25—

'When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left.

Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

As de Tocqueville noted, *if America ever ceases to be good, America will cease to be great*. The church has the power and the responsibility every Sunday to gather in Jesus' name, lift high his God-given message, and consider if our agendas measure up with those of God.

May we both as individuals and as a nation be mindful that any greatness we may have is in correlation to the extent to which we follow the ways of God. And may we respond with humility and with honest inquiry ever seeking after God's will, for the sake of the *whole* world that God so lovingly cradles within God's hands.