

Prayer of the Day: We praise you dear God, for all the ways your love reigns among us every day. You call us here to share the anointing of your Spirit amid all the uncertainties of our world. Startle us again with your power of Christ to turn what's ordinary into something extraordinary. Send us to serve until your glorious kingdom extends to rule over every person and place in creation, in the name of Christ our Lord.

God's Uprising

1 Samuel 16:1-13; Mark 4:30-34

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I believe in honor, faith, and service—to one's country and to all humankind, begins the essay for *This I Believe*. It's a lesson I've learned from my family, from men with whom I served in Vietnam, and from fellow citizens of every kind.

Take William B. Ravel. He was in Patton's tank corps that went across Europe. I knew him, though, as an English teacher and football coach in my school. He could make Shakespeare come alive, and he had incredible leadership talents. What he taught me more than anything else was ... If we stuck to standards of integrity and honor, then we could be proud of ourselves. We could serve causes greater than our own self-interest.

Years later I saw an example of such honor in the most surprising of places. As a scared American prisoner of war in Vietnam, writes John McCain, I was tied in torture ropes by my tormentors and left alone in an empty room to suffer through the night. Later in the evening, a guard I had never spoken to entered the room and silently loosened the ropes to relieve my suffering. Just before morning, that same guard came back and retightened the ropes before his less humanitarian comrades returned. He never said a word to me. Some months later on a Christmas morning, as I stood alone in the prison courtyard, that same guard walked up to me and stood next to me for a few moments. Then, with his sandal, the guard drew a cross in the dirt. (John McCain, quoted and abridged from *This I Believe*, 156-158)

"We will stand here ..." Samuel says to Jesse, "until your youngest son comes." Samuel is on a secret mission to anoint someone with honor, faith and service to be Israel's next king. Now David is not exactly in prison camp. Still, as the youngest of eight children when seven is perfection, out wandering with the sheep in one of the smelliest, lowliest, loneliest of life circumstances in the ancient world, David is barely an afterthought who doesn't even warrant consideration ... even in the eyes of his own family.

But then God doesn't see us and our world as we humans often do. God often overturns our assumptions and goes beyond our expectations. God longs for a world where all people and creatures share abundant life. That means God shows particular concern for those most ordinary, especially the lowly, the lonely and the lost who don't share such abundance. And time and again in the Bible, God finds a way to lift up someone ordinary to lead God's people into the extraordinary life of the kingdom come.

Friends, as we try to see our lives through God's eyes, the good news in stories like these begins by looking through and beyond whatever the political circumstances of ancient Israel. How do Samuel, Saul and David represent relationships in our lives? How do they reflect realities in our nation and our world today?

God uses Samuel to foment a kind of uprising against King Saul. Why is Saul rejected? What's the reason for this transition? Before the scenes we read today, God tells Saul to wipe out all those sinners, the Amalekites. Slaughter all the women and children and every animal they owned. Destroy all semblance of their life. Saul defeats the Amalekites, but saves their king and many people, along with hordes of sheep and cattle. He seems to show mercy. Yet as the story goes God is livid. And God chooses Samuel to let Saul know it. Now, that's about where I put the book down for a minute. I confess to some trouble thinking that's the kind of God I can worship. But then one theme threaded through scripture is how God sees on the heart beneath the surface of things. God sees that Saul spared all that life not so much out of mercy, rather as spoils of war for personal gain. And then Saul tries to tell Samuel: It's all the people's fault. I feared the people and just did what they wanted! If Saul said that, he's a dirty rotten cowardly scoundrel trying to pass the buck and blame someone else for his gain!

As the ancients told these stories, it's also true that kings often stand for what's good or not in all the people. And if we're honest, Saul's selfish motives reflect what's all too often in our hearts as well. Maybe it's not always physically plundering other people's possessions—though do you think we could talk about personal choices and corporate or national priorities that have impacted our recession? Maybe beyond economics we could see how selfishness takes life from others in so many ways. And if we're honest we see how conflicts that will consume Saul's kingdom all too often ravage our relationships, our community, our world. We feel the questions of faith that arise out of these stories about who God is, and how we live through doubt and fear into hope and fullness of life for ourselves and for all creation, even in the face of all that seems so wrong.

With his sandal, the guard drew a cross in the dirt. We stood wordlessly there for a minute or two, venerating the cross, until the guard rubbed it out and walked away. To me that was faith (McCain continues); a faith that unites and never divides, a faith that bridges unbridgeable gaps in humanity. ... I believe that the means to real happiness and the true worth of a person is measured by how faithfully we serve a cause greater than our self-interest. In this society, we celebrate virtues of the quiet hero—the modest person who fulfills duty without complaint or expectation of praise; the one who listens closely for the call to service and answers without reservation, not for fame or reward, but for love.

“I have been an imperfect servant of my country,” McCain concludes, “and my mistakes rightly humble me.” (ibid. 156-158)

And so, after our most recent political transition some of us may think Barack Obama is an imperfect servant of our country. Personally, I hold no illusions that any of our politicians or other leaders never mistakes. All too often we all prove as frail, faulty and self-centered as

David will during his reign. Humility should be where the connections we all share on this planet begin, for better or worse.

As I watched Obama's speech in Cairo on YouTube and saw some person I'll never know stand up among thousands of others to applaud. As I read reports and analysis with pictures of people watching all throughout the Middle East and listening around the world. However much we agree or not on ideas and details given in Obama's speech or for that matter about what John McCain said in the last campaign. Friends, I was struck powerfully by the sense that if we're going to make a transition in the course of our world from suspicions and conflicts and whatever troubles we face that have imprisoned us all, *it will come from the minds and hearts and efforts of millions and millions of ordinary people of every nation and religion not so different from you and me.* People who listen for a call to service greater than self-interest and who answer without reservation in sacrificial love.

What I love about Samuel and David is that this pivotal moment in Israel's history and in our story of faith gets played out in such an ordinary scene of life. Far from halls of power. Far from battlefields of glory. Far from temples of pious perfection. Can you imagine what Samuel must have felt when God told him to fill his horn and set out? He knows the consequences should the powers of Saul find out his purpose. He understands the daunting and difficult task before him. And the people of Bethlehem sense something suspicious in him, when he strolls into town with a cow.

I imagine Samuel felt something like the disciples with Jesus long ago. In many ways, Jesus' entire life was like the parable of the mustard seed. He's someone seemingly so small and insignificant. Through all the ordinary ways he shares life with others God's kingdom grows branches like a great bush to provide sanctuary for so many creatures. Jesus Christ is God's greatest uprising. Friends, trust that the same power of love that raised Jesus from the tomb and came upon the people at Pentecost rises up within us to bring new life. We fill the horns, the watering cans of our hearts – bent, leaking, with dirt and dead bugs as they are – we fill them with the hope of Resurrection. And then God sends us to anoint Christ as king in all the places where life has been plundered; and among all people however much society may deem us celebrity or so ordinary.

In Old Testament times, kings represented the people – their goodness and abundant life; their fortunes for good or ill. Over all the years since, especially as we follow our Lord Jesus Christ, we've come to see and to celebrate how that same power resides in each and every one of us – to bring forth God's kingdom of justice and mercy and peace.

Rise up, dear friends, from any selfishness that imprisons us in unending dissatisfaction and frustration. Go to stand up beside the lowliest, the lonely, the smelliest and the lost people of our society and world; and anoint them with the justice that is resources of abundant life for all.

Rise up, dear friends, from conflicts in our relationships that leave minefields of explosive emotions everywhere we might walk or talk together. Go to stand or sit, to listen and say

we're sorry, to converse, offer forgiveness and in so many other ways extend compassion to those most beloved to us, and even to those we might deem enemies.

Rise up, dear friends, from all faith twisted by doubt or fear or guilt that leave us among the lost and confused. Through all our questions about whether people long ago really got right about what God wanted of them. Through all our attempts to listen together in our worship, Sunday School and care for one another, find strength to stand upon Christ the great foundation of God's goodness. We will have our faults and frailties as we discern and even disagree about the direction of our congregational life. Still, we anoint each other with the healing, the wisdom, the power of God's Spirit of love until we find and pursue whatever it is we can do.

Jody Williams founded the International Campaign to Ban Landmines. She talked about standing up for goodness in her *This I Believe* essay. "I have no idea why people choose to do what they do," she writes. "When I was a kid I didn't know what I wanted to be when I grew up ... My older brother was born deaf. Growing up, I ended up defending him, and I often think that is what started me on my path to whatever it is I am today.

"When I was approached with the idea of trying to create a landmine campaign, we were just three people in a small office in Washington D.C. ... What if nobody cared? What if nobody responded? ... If I have any power as an individual, it's because I work with other individuals in countries all over the world. We are ordinary people: My friend Jemma, from Armenia; Paul, from Canada; Kosal, a landmine survivor from Cambodia; Haboubba, from Lebanon; Christian, from Norway; Diana, from Columbia; Margaret, another landmine survivor, from Uganda; and thousands more. We've all worked together to bring about extraordinary change.

"I know that holding my beliefs and speaking them publicly is not always easy or comfortable or popular, particularly in the post-9/11 world. But I believe that life ... is about trying to do the right thing even when nobody else is looking. Words are easy. Truth is told in the actions we take. And I believe that if enough ordinary people back up our desire for a better world with action, we can, in fact, accomplish absolutely extraordinary things." (Jody Williams, quoted and abridged from *This I Believe*, 257-259)

Friends, along side Jody Williams, John McCain, Barack Obama, people clapping in Cairo, and so many ordinary folks like you and me, join God's uprising "until the Lord of All Creation his heavenly kingdom brings!"

Thanks be to God. Amen.