

David, Hillary, Donald and Me

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell



2 Samuel 7:1-17

At one end of the National Mall in Washington, D.C. nearly two miles opposite the Capitol Building stands the Lincoln Memorial. Completed and dedicated in 1922 it is the design of Henry Bacon and echoes the form of a Greek Doric temple. Inside the Memorial are three chambers divided by Ionic columns and within the center chamber is the Colossus of Abraham Lincoln – a larger than life statue designed by Daniel Chester French that depicts the slain 16th President sitting in meditation, his arms resting upon Roman fasces suggesting a magistrate’s seat of jurisdiction. Lincoln peers across the mall to the Capitol, the judge of the Republic. On opposite walls to his left and right are words from perhaps his two greatest speeches – the Gettysburg Address and the Second Inaugural Address – each speech less than one half the length of this sermon.

If the marbled Lincoln were to rise from his judge’s seat he would stand 28 feet tall. A towering giant. A transcendent figure of history. An iconic leader. To visit the Memorial is to be taken with the homage paid by a grateful nation to one who in the crisis of our history stood in the breach, towered over time, and led us to pursue the better angels of our nature.

No one, however, would find greater irony in the scale of this memorial than Abraham Lincoln. For in the four short years of his Presidency Lincoln often wondered if he was up to the task. If perhaps he was more a mistake of history than the man of history. When speaking to a gathering of Presbyterians midway through his Presidency Lincoln said this: “I was early brought to the living reflection that there was nothing in the arms of this man, however there might be in others, to rely upon for such difficulties,

and that without the direct assistance of the Almighty I was certain of failing. I sincerely wish that I was a more devoted man than I am.” A year before the end of the war Lincoln wrote to a Kentucky newspaper editor, Albert G. Hodges and said, “In telling (my) tale I intend no compliment to my own sagacity. I claim not to have controlled events, but confess plainly that events have controlled me.” At one point he even wondered out loud if maybe God was on the other side of the cause of slavery. Truth is had it been Lincoln that held the sculptor’s chisel the figure he would have chiseled for himself would have been smaller than the smallest here today – and the material out of which he would have sculpted would not have been marble, but clay.

But maybe that is what Daniel Chester French saw in the Man from Springfield – when he took up his chisel -- a simple man who rose larger than life – not out of his own self-image – but a man who towered over time out of his own humility. Lincoln was never afraid to pause and consider the thought that he might be wrong. Socrates said the unexamined life is not worth living. So there the 16th President presides in his magistrate’s chair – the judge of the Republic – there first to judge himself. To examine himself. To question himself.

“Search me, O God, and know my heart,
Try me, and know my thoughts.”

Those words of the Psalmist are words about King David.

And for the people of Israel there stands a no less towering figure in the story of God and his people than King David. Strangely the archaeology and historical records of the time outside of the pages of the Bible shows little record of King David. It is left for Israel to tell her own story about this favored king. A king who began his ascent to the throne through no design of his own. A young shepherd boy, the youngest of Jesse’s sons, good with a slingshot, holds no aspiration for higher office, but it is the discernment of Samuel that singles him out as God’s chosen one for the throne. We don’t have the time to

tell the tale of David’s circuitous path to become King but it shouldn’t be lost on us that the path begins not with David aspiring, but with Samuel summoning. David is a summoned leader.

Now the fact is David is summoned to preside over a theocracy – a form of government that assents to the authority of a particular God and a particular set of laws prescribed by that God. David is God’s chosen one not only to lead the people, but to be God’s voice to the people and to model for the people what it means to be faithful to God. Our form of government, of course, is a democracy that protects the freedom of all people to worship and follow the God of their own choosing. We do not call upon nor expect our President to be the voice of a particular God – only to preserve, protect and defend the constitution of the United States.”

And yet it is our Judeo-Christian heritage that would summon us into the pages of I and II Samuel and have us wonder about this man David who is anointed leader of Israel and whose Kingdom Jesus inherits as his own. “The Lord will give him,” says the angel, “the throne of his father David.” The Biblical writers with megaphone call us to ponder this shepherd boy turned king – and with two weeks to go before deciding on our own leadership – what timely placement this story has in our Narrative Lectionary.

Now the truth is David is a terribly flawed character. We could say that David’s character is terribly flawed. The story of David is this passionate effort to live into the vision God would have for the king of Israel – to be God’s person and the people’s person – and in this passionate effort to be faithful to his country and his God – David makes some significant mistakes.

Mistakes, actually is putting it lightly. David is impetuous in his judgments, he is unable to control his own family and he is the perpetrator of a political and moral scandal that would make even our own politicians blush. And that’s hard to imagine these days. In just a couple of chapters comes that story of the summoned king who summons the wife of one of his generals and sleeps with her and when she’s found to be with child he ends up ordering the general’s death to cover it all up. And just when he thinks that maybe he has gotten away with it – enter one Nathan. Nathan the prophet. Nathan the truth teller. It turns out that one thing David has done is that he has put inside his court and by his side a truth teller. He has placed at his side a person who loves God enough and loves him enough that he is willing to tell David the truth about himself. Because the unexamined life is not worth living. David is the transcendent leader of Israel because David is willing to listen to the truth – especially to the truth about himself.

So Nathan tells David a little story about a rich man who absconds with the little lamb of a poor neighbor and David is enraged that such a man could do such a thing – and all along David cannot see himself in the story until Nathan says, “You are the man.” And David hears the truth. And David opens his soul enough to let the crushing reality inside and to drive him to his knees a broken man. And to confess, according to the Psalmist these words,

Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,

“Who in your life is telling you the truth about yourself?”

and cleanse me from my sin.
For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.
Against you, you alone, have I sinned,
and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you are justified in your sentence
and blameless when you pass judgment.

The man has won for Israel battle after battle. The man has vanquished his foes. The man has danced before the ark of the Lord. The man has composed the great poetry of Israel. The man felled the giant Goliath. All that is enough for him to summon the rarest of marble and to sculpt for himself his own colossus. But Israel loves him not for these things – Israel loves him because he is the man who hears the truth – and who meditates upon the law day and night and who examines his own soul – and who is not afraid to offer unto God a broken spirit. You are the man, Nathan says. And with that comes feet of clay and a broken heart. And a humility perhaps that you and I yearn for in a leader.

Is that possibly true? That the past 60 or 70 weeks of our politics would be enduring if we were but to hear from our candidates some truth about themselves? That there seemed to be some honest examination of their own souls. Some signs of remorse over sins past. Some sense of self-awareness.

Strange isn't it that Jesus in his own "leadership succession plan" offers the keys to the Kingdom – the Kingdom of David, no less – he offers the keys to the kingdom to of all people – Simon Peter. The one summoned off the beaches of the Sea of Galilee. The one who seems always to put his foot in his mouth. The one who sinks into the sea. The one so unaware of himself that he insists to Jesus that of all the disciples he is the one Jesus can most count on not to deny him. And deny him he does. Not once, not twice, but three times. This is the one who has the keys to the kingdom? But that's only the first half of the story. It is Peter who weeps the bitterest in the shadow of the cross. It is Peter who understands maybe more than all the others – how far he has to go.

And Jesus says, now that's my kind of leader. Step by step Peter struggles to claim his role as leader of the church realizing all those things about him that disqualify him from the job. And if tradition is to be believed – Peter insists when it comes time for his crucifixion, Peter insists that he be crucified upside down.

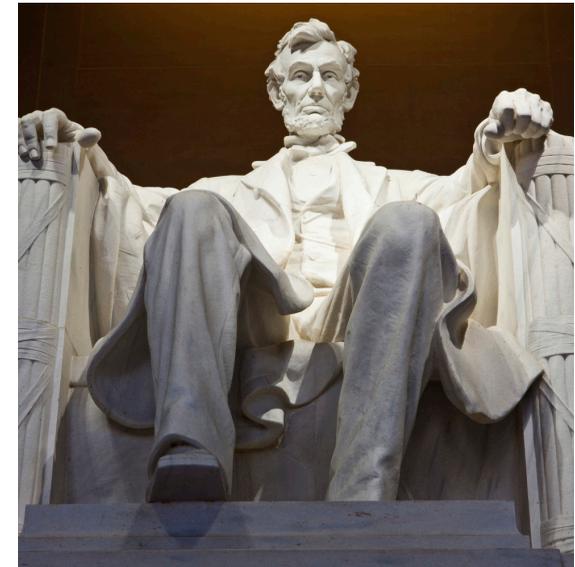
And wouldn't you wonder if they took him to St. Peter's square in Rome today – and pointed him to the gilded halls of the Vatican and the murals and the paintings and told him that this was the Holy See – and that it all stems back to one man, one disciple? Who might this be? Peter would naively ask. You! they would say. You are the man. Can you see him shake his head? Can you hear him say, "Oh, I'm the man all right. I denied him three times!!"

The unexamined life is not worth living. And maybe that's what we yearn for in our leaders – the examined life. Not a perfect life. Not a sinless life. Not a life that agrees with everything we think. But an examined life. One who might place within his or her court a truth teller? One who might listen when truth is told? One whose arms alone – she knows, he knows -- are nothing to rely upon?

Reinhold Niebuhr - one of the last centuries great theologians put it this way - "Ultimately evil is done not so much by evil people, but by good people who do not know themselves and who do not probe deeply."

But can we hope for these things from our leaders if we do not hope them for ourselves? Are we not also being summoned here? It's what the whole story is about. Abraham, Moses, Samuel, David, Ruth, Deborah, Mary, Elizabeth, Peter and Paul. They're all summoned into this great story. And guess what – the first truth to learn is the truth about ourselves. It's the only way to get to the rest of the story of grace and mercy and justice and righteousness – this examined life. Who in your life is telling you the truth about yourself? Not the truth about Donald or Hillary, but the truth about you? Not the cable talking head,

but the one who will help you examine yourself. To discover yourself. And to understand, maybe, what little you understand. What little you have right. And how much we need the help of our Father in heaven. How much we need the help of each other. How much we need even from the one who is on the other side!! To quote Niebuhr again – "Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible. But man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary." America, America God shed his grace on thee. And crown thy good with brotherhood and sisterhood from sea to shining sea.



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Church of the Palms

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