

“Inner Parts”

Reading: 1 Samuel 24:1-15; 2 Samuel 22:1-25, 47-50

Written and preached by [Luke Richards](#)

If you've been following the news around the world recently, you've surely heard something about the crisis taking place in Egypt right now. Violence is always a tragic thing, but especially in a situation like this, when the Egyptians seemed to have a chance at making a positive step forward, whatever progress that may or may not result will end up being marred by rioting. And it's a reminder to us of how grateful we should be for the peace we've enjoyed in our own nation for so long: whatever opinion you might have about whoever is in charge, we can celebrate the fact that we have had mostly peaceful transitions of power in our country like clockwork ever since the Civil War. That's something we should not take for granted, as we're seeing right now in Egypt.

Transitions of power are always fragile things. People often don't like having their power threatened. It's one of those things that drives otherwise decent people crazy: when sex, money, or power are involved, you cannot count on people acting rationally. One of the worse examples in our nation's history happened in the run-up to the Civil War, when our government was trying to sort out whether Kansas should be admitted as a slave or free state. There were many terrible things done related to “Bleeding Kansas,” but one of the most public happened in 1856 on the floor of the United States Senate, “the world's greatest deliberating body.” Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts had made a speech strongly attacking slavery, and a couple of days later, Representative Preston Brooks of South Carolina confronted Senator Sumner on the Senate floor and beat him unconscious with a wooden cane, only stopping when the cane broke. In an act of spiteful humor, southerners sent Representative Brooks hundreds of new canes to replace his broken one.

It's appalling to think of something so brutish taking place anywhere, to say nothing of the floor of the U.S. Senate. But it seems that for some otherwise decent people, threatening their power and control leads them to do appalling things. Sometimes it's the people who have the most power who do the most obviously appalling things to hold onto it, as we see from time to time and are seeing even now in various places around the world. But even if you're not the dictator of a banana republic, there are probably those little ways in which you bristle irrationally when someone else threatens your little slice of power. Maybe it's a TV remote, or a parking space, or a favorite chair; most of us, I think, have those boundaries somewhere where our pride kicks in and our reason gets kicked out.

For the last ten weeks, as a congregation we've been reading through the Bible as one continuous story of what God has done in our world to create it and then redeem it from chaos when humanity rebelled against God. We've watched as God slowly but surely unfolds His plan of starting with one small family, then building that family into a nation, then carving out a space for them to be His people, and from them then to go on and reach out to the entire world. We look at this story and see lots of questionable characters chosen by God, and there are a lot of missteps and bad choices that God then has to work around, and it doesn't seem like God is very efficient. But this week we catch another glimpse of what God is really doing. His ultimate concern is not just about fulfilling His plan, as though He has a checklist of cosmic events that must be completed. More than that, God is concerned about shaping the hearts of the people He contacts. It's not just about the plan, it's about the people as well.

And today we see this messy transition of power that went wrong as so many do, and in the midst of the mess, we see God working on one man's heart. The nation God had created has decided that they don't want God as their king, they want a human king so they can look cool like all the other nations around them. So God gave them a king named Saul. Incidentally, in 1 Samuel 10, when Saul is anointed as king, we're told that God specifically "changes Saul's heart," and Saul is filled with God's Spirit. But Saul's heart-change doesn't seem to stick, because it's not long before he's disobeying God and focusing more on building himself up. So God tells Saul that his kingdom will not endure, and that God is going to seek out "a man after His own heart" to replace Saul as king in 1 Samuel 13. The very next thing Saul does, we're told, is to go and determine how many loyal troops he has; he's gearing up for a fight before he even knows who his opponent is. That tells us something about where Saul's heart is in relation to God.

The prophet Samuel follows God's leading to anoint this new king, and he is led to a certain family with multiple sons. None of the oldest, biggest, strongest sons are chosen. In fact, the son God chooses is the runt of the litter, such an unlikely king that his father didn't even bother to call him in from the fields when Samuel stopped by. But God tells Samuel not to focus on what these sons look like on the outside, because "people look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart." The result is that God sees something in the heart of this young man named David that resonates with God's own heart; something deep within David is exactly what God is looking for.

Remember that the goal of this whole story is for God to redeem humanity and all of creation, to rebuild that broken relationship of trust and faithfulness and love that He intended from the beginning. There is something in David that fits with that plan and furthers God's story. Conversely, there is something in Saul that does not further God's story. Maybe another way of saying it is this: there is something within David that God can build upon, and something in Saul that keeps God from building within him.

It's a tricky thing, because I do not mean to suggest that we have inherently within us good things or bad things that God can or cannot work with. God is the one who saves us, God is the one who redeems His creation, God is the one who defeats death and hell, and His work is not dependent on anything we can or cannot do. To say that David has a heart for God does not imply that he is somehow more deserving of God's favor. I am not suggesting that we are set the way we are by fate or some such thing, and we are therefore pre-determined as to what God does in our lives. On the contrary, the point is that David and Saul both respond to God's work in very different ways, and God generally respects our wishes when it comes to His work in our lives: we can either be receptive to His work, or we can reject it, and generally God will respect our choice.

Saul's heart became full of pride and fear of losing his own power, and the result was that he actively fought against God's plan. As soon as it became clear that God was blessing David, Saul felt threatened, and we have story after story of Saul trying to kill David, plotting against him, pursuing him through the wilderness. It's that heart of pride that says that what I want and what is best in my eyes is more important than God's desire for my life. God rarely uses such a person, and when He does, He usually uses them in spite of themselves. It's not a good place to be.

What do we see in David's heart that is such a contrast, then? He's one of the greatest figures in the Bible; what makes him so great? Well, first of all, we have to affirm that David is hardly perfect. This is a man who makes some serious mistakes. He was a man of war, a violent man, so much so that God forbids David from building God a temple. Remember, people look at the outside, but God looks at the heart. What we think is perfect and praiseworthy is not necessarily what God is concerned about, which is good news for you and me. He's not looking for inherent greatness, He's looking for a responsive heart. So what does that mean, and what does that look like?

Well, let's look at one of David's mistakes and see what he does. We read about the time he was being pursued by Saul into the wilderness, and David and his men end up hiding in the back of a cave while Saul stops in the front of the cave for a bathroom break, not knowing that David is mere feet away from him. David has his chance to kill Saul and claim his kingship right there, but instead he decides to humiliate Saul by cutting off a corner of his robe. But his heart doesn't feel right about this. We might not have blamed him even for killing Saul in that moment, but David doesn't feel right about humiliating someone that the Lord has anointed as king, no matter what the provocation, so he steps out of hiding and begs forgiveness. That's the kind of heart God can work with, a heart that is so sensitive to God's work that it takes the initiative in making things right when a wrong has been done. David was the sort of man who repented from his mistakes. God can work with that.

More than that, we read one of the psalms David wrote, a psalm written about David's time being pursued by Saul. We see first of all that he is a man whose heart immediately turns to God when he's in trouble. There's nothing wrong with crying out to God when you don't know where else to turn; God can work with that heart. David's in trouble, and he looks to God for his salvation. He doesn't stop there, though, because he watches for God's salvation, and we get this magnificent description of God's mighty power to save. David knew what God looked like because he was looking for God. And then, when it was all over and God had saved him from Saul, David took the time to praise God. The psalm ends with, "Praise be to my rock!" He has a heart that thanks God and gives God the credit when the dust clears. That's the kind of heart God can use.

David was a violent man who made mistakes, but he is also remembered as the Psalmist, the song-writer, the artist responsible for some of the most beautiful and enduring songs of praise in history. His heart was one that was tuned to God, not just in times of trouble, and not just in the good times, either, but regularly, every day, throughout his life, even in spite of his mistakes and flaws.

What is there in your heart that resonates with God's heart? What is there in your heart that God can work with, both within you to transform you, and outside of you to transform the world? And don't dismiss the question and quickly say that there's nothing in you for God to use; don't claim that attitude and pretend it's just humility, because it's not. It's the same attitude Saul had, an attitude of pride that is not receptive to God's work. What is there in your heart that God can work with? Do you have a heart of humility? God can work with that. Do you have a heart of love for others? A heart of service? A heart of prayer? A heart of joy? A heart of peace? A heart of repentance? A heart of anger at injustice? A heart that is hurting because of someone else's suffering? A heart that is uncertain of the future but looks to God for salvation? What is there in your inner parts that resonates with God's heart, that He can use for your life and for His plan for the world?



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