

SCRIPTURE

1 Kings 1:1-4

Psalm 146

John 1:35-46

MESSAGE

May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts, be pleasing to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

Some time ago, a preacher friend challenged me to preach the passage from First Kings that we just heard. Not knowing off the top of my head what 1 Kings 1:1-4 actually said, I nodded soberly and assured him that I could do just that.

Once I got home I grabbed my bible to see just what it was that I had agreed to. Then I read it. King David getting old, blood getting thin, can't keep warm at night, and so his attendants decide that what he needs is a gorgeous young maiden named Abishag to keep him warm at night.

How do you preach that? What are we to learn from this story? And who would begin a book with such an odd little side speech as this? It's not exactly 'It was the best of times, it was the worst of times,' or 'Call me Ahab.' It's certainly an odd way to introduce a history book.

It certainly does capture the attention though, doesn't it? That little snippet does kind of make one want to keep reading; it suggests that this may not be your typical dry chronology. But it's still tough material to base a sermon on. Some parts of the bible are not found in the lectionary – this is one of them.

So I sweated over this a little, and with the words of my friend echoing in my ears I determined that I was going to follow through and write this sermon. Several weeks later he and I were talking and he casually said 'You know I was only joking about preaching First Kings, right?' Well. I know that now, don't I?

Nevertheless, I have discovered that I am still immature enough that a schoolyard 'I dare you' is enough to stir me to action. That, combined with the fact that I had already spent some weeks contemplating the reading, and it's not likely that I'll have much opportunity to preach about this in the future brings us to this present moment.

So, we're going to dive into this. God give me wisdom. And maybe God give you a little patience as well.

Let's park David and Abishag for a moment, we'll come back to them soon enough. I'd like to expand our scope a little to give us a context for interpreting this story.

If we look at our faith as a whole we find that the Christian worldview gives us a particular outlook on how time works.

While previous faiths emphasized the cyclic nature of time as observed in the seasons that come and go – our faith is the one that produced the linear view of time. There was a beginning, there is a present, and we are moving toward a defined future.

We are a people of the past because we study a book that is thousands of years old. We gather here every week to remember and recount God's activities among people whose bones have long ago turned to dust. We are a people defined by the past.

But we are also a people of the future because God has created us with a purpose – there is a telos, an eschaton – something that God is calling us towards. That something is a future in which there is no separation from God. God will once more walk among us as he did in the garden. Perfect unity, perfect harmony - between us and God, with ourselves, each other, and all of creation.

So we are a people that hold a unique position in time – we are an ancient-future community. Rooted in the covenants and promises of the past, but living now as those who already belong to the age to come.

What is true on a large scale that comprises thousands of years and nations all over the earth is also true of our own local congregation. We are surrounded and sustained by reminders of the past while we endeavor to step into God's purpose for our future.

Within this room we can find a hundred year old organ, a two year old computer, and roughed in cabling for a video recording system that we don't even have yet. Past, present, and not yet realized future are right here with us.

The same is true of the people. We have folks here who have been practicing their faith for decades. We have people who are just now experiencing God's grace and trying to sort out what it means. And we have people like those early disciples who don't know at all what to make of Jesus, but are interested enough to stick around and find out.

The new and the old come together in God's house. That applies to stuff, to people, to faiths, to lifestyles. Paul writes that there are no longer distinctions – male or female, slave or free – we are all in this together – and so we are. New believers and old believers under one roof.

But we're not all the same. We don't all think alike, or act alike. There's a great potential for friction between those who have been here a long time and those new to the faith. How do we negotiate our differences?

And this is where we return to that somewhat awkward passage from the Hebrew Testament. David was old – old enough that his vitality was sapped. Long gone are the days of his ruddy complexion, beautiful eyes, and strong warrior's body. His strength was gone, his blood thinned, and the cold nights aggravated his aching joints.

David is a picture of past glory. At one time he had it all, he was the King of all God's people on earth, the very image of vigor and virility. But it has all faded; rather than being formidable, David was failing.

To help ease David's sleepless suffering nights David's attendants brought him a young woman to keep him warm. In sharp contrast to David's fading light, Abishag was brilliant. Dark and graceful, Abishag represented the glory and beauty of youth.

So how was their relationship? Scripture only tells us one thing, but that one thing reveals so much. 'Abishag became the David's attendant and served him, but David did not know her sexually.'

Why is this important? What does it matter? Why would the author take care to note this specific fact? I think it has to do with respect, and dignity. Not David's dignity, but Abishag's.

Her job was to keep the king warm at night, and I would assume other caretaking duties like getting him dressed, feeding him – what we would call a personal support worker today.

David was a king; he was used to simply taking whatever he wanted, even if he had to kill to do so. We saw this played out with Bathsheba and her husband Uriah.

But when king David was supplied with this ravishing beauty whose job was to lay with him he did not seek his own gratification. He didn't use her for his own purposes. He allowed her to do her job without pressuring her for something more. David treated Abishag as a human being, not property. He showed respect and dignity for her, for himself, and for their relationship.

Now, if we apply this to St Paul's, and the mix of old and new members that comprise all congregations, we learn something about what our relationships should look like.

Some congregations want new people because they need more bums in seats, and more money in the offering plate. They need strong backs and nimble fingers to do the work of the church. New folks are sometimes seen as a commodity – a resource. Something to be exploited.

But what David teaches us is that we ought not to seek our own advantage from the young. They are not here to gratify our desires. Instead, new people should be treated as the images of God that they are; they are not our possession, but rather our treasure and our joy.

We would do well to remember that love empowers – it doesn't overpower. Love wants what is best for the other, not for the self.

Nobody demonstrates this better than Jesus. John writes that we are able to love because Jesus loved us first. He showed us what love means.

Consider what it means that Jesus loved us first. Before anything, Christ loved us. While we were still sinners, we were loved. Even if we openly rejected God, treated his people harshly, and trampled his creation, we were loved.

We weren't loved after we chose to love God, and pray and become good people. God's love is not a consequence of our actions – it precedes anything that we've ever thought or done. So what that

means is that we don't earn God's love, we don't deserve God's love, and it's not a result of us conforming to certain behaviours or attitudes.

If that's true of God's love for us, then our love for newcomers should certainly not be contingent upon how they dress, the way they pray, or how hard they work while they're here. Simply put, we don't need to control people; we don't need to turn them into copies of ourselves.

The new faces among us are not here for our benefit. In fact, the very opposite is true – we are here for their benefit. That was the original blessing, the original covenant. Blessed to be a blessing to all people.

Now this may sound like an admonition of sorts, but it's actually intended to be the opposite. It is a liberation. It takes the pressure off us to change others and make them into younger versions of ourselves. We don't have to be in control.

In this morning's gospel reading we see Jesus' response when he was approached by those who became his disciples. What were his words? 'Come and see.' 'Follow me.'

Jesus didn't begin by burdening people with a long list of do's and don'ts. He simply said 'Walk with me.'

That's our blueprint for engaging people as well, and we see in the reading that Philip picked up on this immediately. When challenged by his friend Nathaniel Philip responded by using Jesus' own words 'Come and see.'

John wrote that in this world we are like Jesus. We're all on this journey together, so as we travel do what Jesus did: we invite others that we encounter along the way to 'Walk with me a little while.'

Not to carry our load for us, nor to make them look like us, but so that as we journey together we both start to look a little more like Christ.

Because, though we are moving toward a definite goal, we would do well to remember that it is not we who determine that goal. God does.

So we don't have to mold each other – we don't have to place unnecessary burdens on each other. That's not our role.

Although there are old and new believers here, with old and new ways of doing things, there is not division. There is no us and them, but only all of us – following a star placed in the heavens, encouraging all those we meet along the way to join in the adventure of discovering God's presence and purpose among us.

I speak to you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
Amen.