

Pentecost 4, 2018

The Lord was Sorry: Holy Change

In 1077 or 1078, Anselm of Canterbury wrote the *Proslogion*, a collection of theological meditations which includes his ontological principle—an argument for the existence of God he is particularly remembered for. To briefly summarize, Anselm defines God as that which is greater—more loving, knowledgeable, good and powerful—than anything that exists or even anything we can think of or comprehend. Thus, God exists because God is greater even than our thoughts of God not existing.¹ Some have described this understanding of God as the maximally perfect being.² And this ontological (metaphysical) principle is Anselm’s attempt to, in the smallest way, comprehend the incomprehensible.

Anselm wrote this in 1077 AD and around 600 BC the authors of 1st Samuel wrote our lesson today. At the beginning it says, “And the Lord was sorry that he had made Saul King over Israel.” This sentence can easily slip by but it makes me wonder how is it that our “maximally perfect God” is sorry for something God did—for making Saul King over Israel?

The Old Testament is renowned for its challenging understandings of God—and it can be tempting to write off this part of our scripture as less than our new testament or just the mistake or projection of its human author or authors. There are times when this may be helpful but there are times when we gain the most from wrestling with those parts of scripture we don’t understand, find complicated or which don’t seem to make any sense. To ask, what’s happening here. It’s probable, like any good piece of literature or theatre, like real life, there is more going on than we first perceive.

My mother called me on Sunday to remind that the Tony’s were on television. She raised me watching, on video, loads of musicals. For any who are unfamiliar the Tony’s are comparable to the Oscars but for live theatre off and on Broadway. It awards all different parts of a good theatrical production of which there are many: set design, lighting, costume, script, score—there’s a lot that makes a good play.

Theatre has been on my mind since Sunday, if it were a play 1st Samuel’s script has it all—comedy, tragedy, love, betrayal. Of course, the Tony’s awards best actor and, appropriately on this Father’s Day, we have three strong nominees: Samuel, Saul and David.

To help set the stage for what we heard today: The Book of First Samuel is part of a much larger work—it immediately follows the book of Judges which describes the earliest governance structure for Israel, God’s people. First and Second Samuel are named after one especially well-respected judge of Israel, Samuel—He is well-respected because he hears and obeys God. During this book, Israel decides they want to be like other nations and have a king

¹¹ Main argument in Anselm of Canterbury’s *Proslogion*, 3. From *The Christian Theology Reader*, 4th Edition. Edited by Alister McGrath. Oxford; Wiley Blackwell, 2011.

² Alvin Plantinga uses this language in *The Nature of Necessity*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974.

(the part we heard last week), God tells them this isn't the best idea, but they persist and God, with the help of Samuel, anoints Saul, our next important actor, "the most handsome in the land" as the first King of Israel. Saul at first, is obedient to God, a faithful servant but as his time as king progresses we see him begin to value his own judgment more than Gods. God tells Samuel, the judge, that he will appoint a new king for Israel. An unassuming candidate, David—the musical one of the bunch— from Bethlehem is chosen by God to be the next King of Israel. Today, we are told, God is sorry the he had made Saul king over Israel and tells Samuel to anoint David as next King.

If God is like the playwright or the director, Saul is an actor who can, ultimately, choose what he does or does not say or do—and he chooses to disobey God. But God does not just cast Saul out, replacing Saul with the understudy right away—it's important then to read on—Saul kingship is not taken away and he remains king until his death. He loses the Spirit of the Lord and David, with his lyre—the ancient stringed instrument—goes to comfort Saul. Saul is not forgotten by God.

The Bible does not give us easy-to-digest stories and the characters of the Old Testament are complex, because they are humans. Saul is one of these characters-- once obedient and faithful to God but tempted by power and wealth turns away from God. He is both good and bad, of God and away from God. But, Saul turns further and further away from God—after David defeats Goliath, Saul tries to kill David and becomes jealous. David becomes best friends with Saul's son Jonathan and eventually Saul and Jonathan die in battle and while David mourns he then becomes king. These men are not just characters, they are our ancestors. We are part of this same production! We are meant to learn from these stories of our ancestors, and there's more be learned every time we revisit them.

God is sorry for appointing Saul King, but sorry may not be as straightforward as we think either. The word sorry, in Hebrew, could mean several things including consoled oneself, regretted or repented. God's being sorry is not necessarily about a mistake or miscalculation on God's part as much as it is about a change, an expression of love for God's people. In some ways, it is more like a parental form of love. God gives his children something they really want, a king, almost against God's better judgment. Then God tries to remediate it. It is an acknowledgement that it is time for a change to help keep God's people on track towards the kingdom of God.

If the Maximally Perfect Being can recognize the need for change, we can, too. It's hard to see and acknowledge something that isn't going well that we've been a part of. Many studies show that we see what we expect to see—for example, researchers found that when asked to find the toothbrush in a certain photo most people identify a regular toothbrush sitting on the bathroom counter rather than a massive three and a half feet long toothbrush hanging on the wall³—we tend to see what we expect to see and this applies to our reading of scripture—when we expect to see a vengeful God in the OT we'll probably see it, but to all parts

³ Murphy, Heather. "Why we miss things in front of us." October 6, 2017.

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/10/06/science/why-we-miss-things-in-front-of-us.html>

of our life. We see what we expect to see until we change those expectations to meet what God hopes for us.

Spiritual leaders through the centuries have named the importance of unlearning that which we think know.⁴ While our experiences can give us wisdom they can also give us unnecessary biases, misplaced understandings of our own importance, or unfair expectations of ourselves and others. The goal is to remain open to God's will for us. Each day. For when we don't, as Saul shows us, we find ourselves not only turned away from God but turned away from who we are made to be as God's beloved children. The Old Testament is like one very big reminder to turn back to God's will, no matter what. That's what brings us from bondage to freedom. Trust in God, listen to God. Believe in God, that's what will move us forward. We are part of a much larger history than just today—we are part of the story of God's salvation for humanity. We are given the agency to be actors in God's story or to try and make our own—this agency can be frightening but ultimately is our most hopeful reality.

We are invited each time we gather, we come to the Eucharist, each time we recognize ourselves before God to turn back and receive all that God gives us, no matter what our story has been like. We return there again and again because we're complex characters, too, and are bound to lose sight of God's ways time and again but always we can change and head back towards God. If our Old Testament family isn't enough of a warning of why we need to do this, today we hear that even God shows us this, changing, turning towards God is holy.

We return, we give thanks, we come before God who is greater than anything we think or feel is blocking the holy spirit within us or in our world. Then we act, in God's will, as part of God's story for a return to the kingdom we were made for, along with Samuel, Saul and David, the Kingdom of God.

⁴ Examples include Theresa of Avila, Meister Eckhart and St John of the Cross.