

“Out of His Hands”  
1 Samuel 26:6-25  
6<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

July 21, 2019  
Westminster, Greenville  
Ben Dorr

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Our family spent some time at the beginning of this month visiting my side of the family back in Michigan.

It was a splendid vacation.

We got there by driving through the Great Smoky Mountains. I’d never seen them before—they were gorgeous, just beautiful.

It made me want to hike in those mountains someday in the future.

And if I ever do go hiking there, I’m going to remember the advice of Bill Carl, another Presbyterian minister, the former President of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary.

Bill says that he has enjoyed hiking in the Smoky Mountains of Tennessee on a number of occasions in his life. During the course of those excursions, he got to know a guide, an expert hiker.

Her name was Margaret Stevenson.

Mrs. Stevenson, who is now deceased, was a legend in the Smoky Mountains in her day.

Says Bill:

“She used to hike ten or fifteen miles every day...It was a joy to hike with Margaret, because she knew every turn and every trail and every plant and tree by its Latin and colloquial name.

“My first trip up Mt. LeConte was her seventy-fifth, and my second was her hundred twenty-fifth. My third was her five-hundredth trip. When she finally stopped hiking, she had climbed Mt. LeConte more than 700 times.

“Once when we were hiking together, we came upon what Margaret described as the most unrelenting two-mile ridge in the whole area—two miles up with no break, and this after a hard six miles on a very hot day.

“I like to hike in spurts,” writes Dr. Carl, “so I said, ‘See you later, Margaret,’ and took off in my usual fashion and got way ahead of her.

At some point, I found myself lying flat on my back in half delirium.  
A blurred Margaret passed at her steady pace.

I can still hear the click-clack of her cane and with no pity in her voice, ‘One more mile to go, Bill. I’ll see you at the top!’

And so she did, arriving well ahead of me without stopping once.”<sup>1</sup>

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Now what was Bill Carl’s problem on that hike?  
He just decided he could finish it fast and quick and all at once.  
No patience...

Have you ever done that before?  
I don’t mean hiking on a mountain.  
I just mean with life in general.

Have you ever decided that you could do something quick and fast and all at once...and it BACKFIRED on you?

This is the dilemma that David faces in our text for today.

David is on the run.  
Saul wants to kill him because Saul is jealous of David.  
So David is fleeing for his life.

And we come to chapter 26.  
In chapter 26, David has an opportunity to stop running.  
Saul and his men are camping, and it’s night, and they’re all asleep.  
David sees Saul sleeping.  
Saul has no idea David is there.

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<sup>1</sup> As told by Dr. Bill Carl in his article in the “Homiletical Perspective” on this text, found in *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 1*, edited by David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008.

Remember, Saul has tried to kill David twice already.  
 All David has to do is give the order to end Saul's life.  
 And one of David's men says to him:

“God has given your enemy into your hand today; now therefore let me pin him to the ground with one stroke of the spear; I will not strike him twice.”

Pause right there.

Do you see how TEMPTING this must have been for David?

If David kills Saul, David can STOP running, RETURN home, become KING!

Killing Saul is the easy thing to do.  
 Killing Saul is the SAFEST thing to do.

Why not take matters into his own hands?  
 Why not act fast and quick and all at once?

Here's your chance, David.  
 Just give the order, David.  
 And David...decides to wait.

If I were to ask you what stories about David you remember, I'll bet the first would be David and Goliath, in which David is a HERO. Or maybe the anointing of David, the forgotten brother, the least likely son. Or maybe David playing the lyre for Saul, when Saul is tormented by an evil spirit.

But let me commend to you our story for today, a lesser known story but a very important one in David's life...one in which David's gift is not his ability with a sling, or his ability to make beautiful music...but instead, it's his ability...  
 to wait.

Why does David wait?

On the one hand, it could be SELF-INTEREST.

As the biblical scholar Robert Alter has pointed out, David will not lift a hand against the Lord's anointed because he, David, is ALSO the Lord's anointed...and someone could do the same to him one day.<sup>2</sup>

Maybe it's for his own good that he waits.  
Or maybe it's for the COMMON GOOD that he waits.

After all, if David kills the current king, not everyone in Israel will be happy with those arrangements. Becoming king by killing, even in self-defense...may not be the route to the throne that will do his country the most good.

But even if those two reasons play a role, I think there is a third.  
David waited...because he trusted GOD'S HANDS more than his own hands.

And it was hard to do.  
No guarantee for his future, even when he does this.

If you read the first verse of chapter 27, David says to himself:  
"I shall now perish one day by the hand of Saul..."  
David feels NO GUARANTEE that waiting will keep him safe...  
and yet, he trusts his life in God's hands,  
more than his own hands.

How are you with waiting?

If any of you enjoy it, like it, and would consider yourself an expert in waiting, please see me after worship today, because I will hire you to be my personal tutor.

I'm not a fan of waiting.

On our trip home from the Midwest, we were just outside of Asheville, and we noticed on the other side of the highway that the cars were slowing down.

There was construction.

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Alter, *The David Story: A Translation with Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel*, New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1999.

And this line was starting to form.

And this line of cars on the Interstate...it was one mile long, then two miles long, then five miles long...you know what I was saying at that moment? Praise Jesus I'm on the other side of that highway!

How are you with waiting?

I'm not a fan, and let's be clear.

There are times in life when it is UNFAITHFUL to wait.

In the face of bigotry or xenophobia or unrestrained greed...  
Christians are not called to inaction and apathy.

That's not the kind of waiting I mean.

I'm speaking of waiting not as the easy way out, but as the hard way forward.

Did you know that the word "patience" derives from a Latin word, which means "to suffer"?

A few years ago, when we lived in Dallas, I went to visit another pastor in the presbytery.

A retired pastor, he had had a stroke.

Could not speak intelligibly, could not swallow, received nourishment through a feeding tube.

It was heartbreaking, especially since I had known him at an earlier time, when he was capable and sharp and served as stated clerk of the Presbytery. But what I saw in his room, his rehabilitation room, almost took my breath away.

I don't mean the symptoms of the stroke.

I mean who else was there.

His wife was in the room.  
 She had health difficulties of her own, but she was there.  
 Talking to him, making sure he knew she was there for him.

And a member of his former church was there.  
 This member was part of a rotating shift of members from that church.

They would come in, they stay, they sit.  
 They couldn't do much.

All they could do is talk to their former pastor, and take his hand, and show him by their presence how much they love him. And no one knew what the next day would hold. And no one knew what kind of difference their presence made.

But the congregation kept that rotation going.

Day after day, faithful members of a church he used to serve, arriving and sitting and staying with him, to show God's love not as hustle or activity, but as PRESENCE, and PATIENCE, and more PATIENCE...

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It's hard to wait, right?  
 But we can be intentional about HOW we wait.

For example, there may be someone in this room right now who is waiting for a grown child to grow up. How will you wait? In what ways do you try to influence the course of events in that child's life, and in what ways do you take your hands off, and simply walk with that grown child through their life?

It's not easy, knowing how to wait.

Or perhaps there is someone in this room right now who is anxious about a loved one's health, and you cannot control whether or not your loved one will get better...and so you hope and you pray...what kind of waiting is God asking you to do?

Waiting is rarely easy, but the good news is that the Bible knows this, and all through scripture—not just in the story of David, but all through the Bible, stories are written about people who learned how to wait.

Consider Abraham.

Abraham was 75 years old when God first promised him that God would make of him a great nation.

At age 75, Abraham and Sarah are finally going to have a family.

But then he turns 76...and then he turns 77...

and how old is Abraham when Isaac comes along?

100 years old.

That's 25 years of waiting.

Or how about in Luke's Gospel, that wonderful character Simeon? Luke says that Simeon had waited his entire life to see the Messiah—he goes to the Temple day in and day out, year after year—until finally, in his old age, God fulfills God's promise!

Wonderful story.

But can you imagine what it was like for Simeon when Simeon was, say, 55 years old?

With maybe 30 years of faithful waiting under his belt,  
and he's wondering when the day will come?

And maybe he's secretly doubting....  
is the day really going to come?

The early church thought Jesus would come back right away.  
And the early church had to learn, year after year, how to wait.

The exiles in Babylon wondered whether they would ever see the Promised Land again.

And Isaiah wrote to those exiles, and said:

“...those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength...”

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So much of the Christian life is, in fact, learning HOW to wait.

And maybe you can recall a time when you decided you couldn't wait any more, and you took matters into your own hands, because you wanted to do things fast and quick and all at once...and sometimes that's the faithful thing.

But not always.

Maybe you can recall when you acted with impatience, and ended up on your back like Bill Carl all those years ago.

The question is not whether we will wait.

The question is how will we do it...

Almost 30 years ago, on February 11, 1990,  
when Nelson Mandela was released from prison,  
everyone was surprised that he **walked** from the prison  
rather than being driven by car.

**It was the act of a patient man.**

His long walk toward the crowds  
mirrored his long walk to freedom  
and that of his people.

By walking he echoed that his freedom wouldn't come  
without the release of his people.

He reiterated the solidarity he'd shown  
throughout the previous decade when he refused to be set free  
unless his release coincided with political change.

In his speech that day Mandela said, '*Our march to freedom is irreversible.*'  
It was NOT to be rushed, or snatched,  
like something that was in doubt, or might disappear....



He knew that time and that God were on his side.

On the strength of that knowledge he reached out to the WHOLE population.

Mandela said, *‘We call on our white compatriots to join us in the shaping of a new South Africa. The freedom movement is a political home for you too.’*

He described his arch-opponent, President F.W. de Klerk, as a ‘man of integrity.’

What an extraordinary statement of magnanimity  
towards a person who, together with his predecessors,  
had kept Mandela in prison for ten thousand days.<sup>3</sup>

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Can you imagine that kind of magnanimity in OUR OWN society these days?

It requires a kind of strength that is so much different than the IMPETUOUS, reflexive responses that we see in our political arena, and our social media platforms...

The next time you run across a moment in your life, or a season in your life, where it’s hard for you to wait, and you really want to grab the steering wheel...

let me invite you to think of David on that night long ago,  
that night when David found Saul asleep in his camp.

David had a chance to act fast and quick and all at once—  
and everything would be in his hands.

Instead, he left Saul—  
and his own future—  
in God’s hands.

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<sup>3</sup> I am indebted to a sermon by the Rev. Mark Ramsey, “Wait For It,” preached at Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church, Asheville, North Carolina, on November 2, 2014, for this reference to Nelson Mandela.

And God was with David.  
And God saw David through.

Did you know that God loves you just as much as God loved David?

Whatever WAITING you are being forced to do right now...  
or being called to do right now...  
do not be afraid.

God will see you through.

Amen.