



# SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

July 20, 2014

"Doing What Is Right" — 1 Samuel 24:1-22

The Rev. Dr. Tim Shaw

This summer we're talking about facing the giants in our lives and are exploring that theme by looking at the life of David from the Old Testament. The first thing we discovered is that in order to face the giants in our lives we need friends.

And we also discovered that God calls us and empowers us to be a specific kind of friend. God calls us to be a friend like Jonathan was to David. Jonathan looked beyond his own ambition and looked into the life of David and invested himself in his friend's life so that David might become what God wanted him to be.

The first giant we talked about last week was one that we can face when we're living through a season in our lives where we are anxious or afraid. And that giant is our feelings of entitlement—when we have a different standard for ourselves than we do for others. Today and next week, we're going to explore a temptation we all face at one time or another and that's the temptation to take revenge on people who have done us wrong.

I love the sound of wind in pine trees. I have great memories of adventures in the mountains with good friends. I can remember winter camping in the Sierras

with a group of young adults from my former church in California and being stunned by the brightness and the number of stars in the sky at night. I remember sitting for hours beside an alpine lake in the Grand Tetons and being so at peace that I didn't want to leave. I've discovered, as Eugene Peterson has suggested, "that the wilderness is both a place of beauty and it is a place of danger". More about that in a minute.

In our Bible text, David is on the run from murderous King Saul and he now finds himself living the life of Bear Grylls. David is in the wilderness. He and his band of men are hiding in the caves of En Gedi. I've been to the place where David and his men sought refuge. Near En Gedi, there is in a narrow, 300-yard long canyon carved into a 2,000-foot table-topped mountain. That canyon runs west from the Dead Sea.

In 2007, I had the opportunity to take an amazing class from Jerusalem University College in the Holy Land. The course was called "The Historical and Geographical Setting of the Bible". With my intern, Dan Carlson from First Pres. Berkeley, we travelled all over Israel, the West Bank and Jordan for four weeks.

On one particularly hot day, after exploring what remains of the citadel of Masada, our class of 50 boarded our bus for the short trip north along the western shore of the Dead Sea. We were caked in dried sweat from our morning on Masada, so our instructor, Dr. Carl Rasmussen who is the editor of the NIV Bible Atlas, decided it would be a good idea to take a swim in the Dead Sea before we did anything else. That experience of swimming in the Dead Sea would best be described not as a swim, but as a float, since it is nearly impossible to do anything else in the Dead Sea but bob like a cork on the surface of the water. The salinity of the water is so high that I could feel the disinfecting qualities of the water cleaning every tiny cut or abrasion anywhere on my body.

The entrance to the narrow canyon at En Gedi was practically across the highway from the beach. After we dried off, we started our hike. The trail to En Gedi is a steady, gradual climb from the Dead Sea up into what eventually ends in a box canyon. There was a beautiful stream running through the middle of the canyon, with these amazing freshwater pools we could swim in. That was a refreshing gift since our bodies, which had been caked in sweat, were now covered with dried salt.

**T**here was a tremendous sense of peace in that place. The further we got away from the highway, the more peaceful it became. Eventually, we could no longer hear anything but the voices of our friends, the sound of water cascading over rocks, and the wind in the trees. When we reached the end of the canyon there were large caves carved out of the rock wall and a waterfall that poured down from the plateau above. I remember sitting there for quite awhile, thinking about how this place must have ministered to David's soul. Being there was certainly renewing for me.

Based on personal experience, I've discovered that the wilderness is like that. It can be, as Eugene Peterson writes, "a place of truth, a place of beauty, and a place of love." Just recently, while I was up on a mountainside in Mgambeni, Swaziland, I became aware of the fact that I could not hear anything that had been made with human hands. No machinery. Only what God had created. The peace, the silence was thick with the presence of God's Spirit. I could feel my soul being restored. I am so thankful that there are still places in the world that are not being utilized for anything but just are.

Peterson writes, "There are things that we can experience only in silence and solitude. There are essential things about being human that can be known only in the shadow of a beech tree, beside the rush of a whitewater stream or after a long climb up a mountain."

Nancy Newall writes, "The wilderness holds answers to questions (many of us have) not yet learned to ask."

David ended up spending a lot of time in the wilderness and those were some of the best years of his life. He didn't really choose to spend time in the wilderness like I do. He was driven into the wilderness by a crazy man by the name of Saul. David was chased into the wilderness because he was running for his life.

In addition to being a place of focus and restoration, David will discover that the wilderness can also be a dangerous place. The wilderness is unpredictable. It can be life threatening. I have a friend who woke up with a huge elk two inches away from his face. I've been lost in a blizzard while winter camping in the Sierras. I've had friends who have been awakened in the middle of the night by a bear trying to break into their bear canister by lifting it over its head and pounding it onto a rock. I've had friends who were caught in an electrical storm while rock climbing.

The wilderness can be a dangerous place. Peterson writes, "Always, in the wilderness, there's a tension between the beauty and the danger, between pristine simplicities and sinister threats. And because most of us can't sustain this tension for long, we live in towns and cities. We surround ourselves with water faucets and furnaces, roofs and street signs, grocery stores and police officers and firefighters. We lock our doors at night, put umbrellas over our heads when it rains, and keep our dogs on a leash. But there are times, no matter how thoroughly we're civilized, when we're plunged into the wilderness—not a geographical wilderness but what I'm going to call a circumstantial wilderness." (Leap Over a Wall, page 74). That's what's happened to David.

In this passage, David suddenly has an opportunity to take revenge on his great nemesis. David and his men are hiding in the caves in En Gedi. They know that Saul and his men are looking for them. But it must have come as a complete surprise to David and his men when the silhouette of King Saul appeared at the mouth of the cave they were in. Saul has no idea David is inside that cave. All Saul has on his mind is taking care of his personal business in the privacy of that cave.

I've dug a number of holes in the ground out in the wilderness, helped make a couple of snow-toilets in my day and the goal is always some measure of privacy. Saul is looking for privacy. What he gets is an audience. It's hard to imagine a more vulnerable position for Saul to be in than the one he's in in 1 Samuel 24.

David's men think this is their perfect opportunity to solve all their problems. Lots of people in Israel hated Saul. Many know that Saul is a terrible leader. A high percentage of people realize he's lost his mind. This would be so easy. Take Saul out and David will become king of Israel. Let's look at 1 Samuel 24.

**1** When Saul returned from following the Philistines, he was told, "Behold, David is in the wilderness of Engedi." **2** Then Saul took three thousand chosen men out of all Israel and went to seek David and his men in front of the Wildgoats' Rocks.

**3** And he came to the sheepfolds by the way, where there was a cave, and Saul went in to relieve himself. Now David and his men were sitting in the innermost parts of the cave.

**4** *And the men of David said to him, "Here is the day of which the LORD said to you, 'Behold, I will give your enemy into your hand, and you shall do to him as it shall seem good to you.'"*

David has lots of reasons to take revenge on King Saul. Look at what Saul has done to him. Saul tried to kill David six times. And what has David done to deserve this kind of treatment? Nothing except fight and win Saul's battles, marry one of his daughters, and try to soothe Saul's troubled soul as a court musician. And what has this loyalty cost David? Well, it's almost cost him his life six different times. He's lost access to his family and to his best friend. His reputation has been tarnished in Israel. He's lost his freedom. He's on the run. He lives in constant anxiety and for what?

If he killed Saul, it would be seen by many as self-defense. The nation would be rid of a terrible leader and the way would be clear for David to fulfill his God-given calling to be the king.

It would be easy for David to think that God must somehow be behind this miraculous turn of events. That's what David's men think. Here's his enemy, vulnerable and unarmed. In the darkness of the cave, his men urge David to act; to kill him. But David motions to them to stand down. He will not do this to Saul.

God could have easily orchestrated this appointment between Saul but the fact that God has brought them together tells you very little about what David should do with this opportunity. Just because you find yourself with the upper hand, that

alone does not tell you what you should do.

*Verse 4b: Then David arose and stealthily cut off a corner of Saul's robe. 5 And afterward David's heart struck him, because he had cut off a corner of Saul's robe. 6 He said to his men, "The LORD forbid that I should do this thing to my lord, the LORD's anointed, to put out my hand against him, seeing he is the LORD's anointed." 7 So David persuaded his men with these words and did not permit them to attack Saul. And Saul rose up and left the cave and went on his way.*

In the wilderness of En Gedi, David recovers a perspective on his life and he recovers his integrity. He will not do what is expedient and self-serving. He'd done that once before and it cost the life of his pastor and 85 others. This time, David will do what was right.

All of us face the temptation to take revenge on those who have hurt us. We are particularly tempted when we know their weaknesses and vulnerabilities. We know exactly what we could say to get them back for what they've done to us. We sometimes find ourselves rehearsing the blistering speech we plan to deliver one day. We know how to undermine them, particularly when they're in a position of weakness. We may not set out to completely destroy someone else but we can quietly chip away at their reputation, or make it difficult for them to achieve their goals and objectives. And we can surround ourselves with people who will support us and agree with us in doing so.

A person at work can take credit for a project that you did and end up getting affirmation

from the boss and maybe even a promotion. And instead of finding a way to appropriately confront your colleague or your boss, the temptation is to look for a way to bring them down. Revenge makes a false promise of relief but when acted upon, results in greater pain and little, if any, respite. We take revenge on someone else and end up swallowing the bitter poison ourselves.

Something has happened to David in the wilderness. In this chapter of their story, Saul and David find themselves in a wild place. Saul remains obsessed with taking revenge on David for something he thought David had done to him or might do to him. As Peterson writes, "(Saul's) life narrowed to a murderous squint." (Leap Over a Wall, Page 80)

David, living in that same wilderness, had a completely different experience out in the wild. In the wilderness his eyes opened, his vision expanded and that enabled him to reconnect with God. And that connection with God changed the way he saw himself and others. Specifically, it enabled David to see Saul in a different way. What David says to Saul after he spares his life, reflects this change in vision. He no longer simply sees Saul as his enemy. He sees Saul with his flaws but as one whom God loves.

**8** *Afterward David also arose and went out of the cave, and called after Saul, "My lord the king!" And when Saul looked behind him, David bowed with his face to the earth and paid homage. 9 And David said to Saul, "Why do you listen to the words of men who say, 'Behold, David seeks your harm!'"*

**10** *Behold, this day your eyes have seen how the LORD gave you today into my hand in the cave. And some told me to kill you, but I spared you. I said, 'I will not put out my hand against my lord, for he is the LORD's anointed.'*

**11** *See, my father, see the corner of your robe in my hand. For by the fact that I cut off the corner of your robe and did not kill you, you may know and see that there is no wrong or treason in my hands. I have not sinned against you, though you hunt my life to take it.* **12** *May the LORD judge between me and you, may the LORD avenge me against you, but my hand shall not be against you.*

David's time in the wilderness opened his eyes and enabled him to see God's beauty and presence even in places where he once thought God could never be. He saw God's hand in the life of his enemy. David's time in the wilderness with God taught David some important lessons.

Do you know the story of Louis Zamperini? He died a few weeks ago at the age of 97. The amazing story of his life was told in Laura Hillebrand's book, *Unbroken*, and Angelina Jolie will retell his incredible story on film this Christmas. In spite of all that he suffered as a prisoner of war in World War II, even though his first strategy for dealing with the pain and injustice he experienced was to medicate it with alcohol, even though his initial response to the offer of a relationship with God was to reject Jesus Christ, Louie eventually gave in to the wooing of the Holy Spirit and that relationship with God began to change him.

As a follower of Christ, Louis went back to forgive his captors and to tell them the good news of the gospel. In 1998 he wanted to meet with the guard who had brutalized him. That man was still alive in 1998. Initially, the man agreed to meet Louis but at the last minute he didn't show up for the meeting. The two never met.

In the wilderness created by his suffering, Louis met Jesus Christ and the way he viewed the world, including the way he saw people who had hurt him the most, changed. He no longer viewed the man who had treated him so unjustly simply as his enemy. God enabled Louis to see that man as one made in the image of God and worthy of the sacrifice of Christ. God set Louis free and he did that work in Louis' life in the wilderness.

In the wilderness, Saul's vision continued to narrow into a revenge-filled view of the world. In that same wilderness, David's field of view widened. His vision cleared and he had a fresh encounter with God. That enabled him to see himself differently and it freed him to see others the way God saw them.

Instead of exacting revenge on humanity, Jesus Christ died the death we deserved to die because of our own selfishness and sin. Jesus Christ gave his life for us when he would have been justified in bringing down on humanity his just punishment.

Look at what humanity is capable of. Nearly 300 people, including small children, are dead today because of the careless act of one of the warring factions in Eastern Ukraine. Jesus died for a humanity that is capable of an act

like that and is guilty of even more. He gave his life so that we might have the live the life that is his life.

In our times in the wilderness, God wants to widen our field of view—to open our eyes so that we might receive God's incredible gifts of grace and mercy so that we might be able to give those same gifts to others, even to those who deserve them the least.

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*Sunday sermon texts are also available at [fpchawaii.org](http://fpchawaii.org). The audio version can be downloaded from iTunes. It can also be sent to you by e-mail. You may also request the free audio version by visiting: [fpchkoolau@gmail.com](mailto:fpchkoolau@gmail.com)*