

14th Sunday in Ordinary Time

II Samuel 5:1-10; Psalm 48; Mark 6:1-13; II Corinthians 12:2-10

II Samuel 5:1-10 This Old Testament lesson for the lectionary deals with two important subjects: the selection and coronation of David as king over all of Israel and David's taking of Jerusalem so that it could be made into the capital of the nation.

5:1-5 deals with David ascending to the throne of a united Israel. Israel was really divided around two centers of government. The first was that of Judah, centered around the city of Hebron, and consisting of the two tribes of Judah and Benjamin. The second was that of Israel, centered around the city of Gibeon, and consisting of the ten remaining tribes of the people of Israel. Although Judah was made up of only two tribes, those two tribes together were so large that they equaled the power of the other ten tribes combined. Immediately upon Saul's death, David was crowned king of Judah, while Ishbaal (also called in scripture, Ishbosheth), one of Saul's sons, was anointed as king over the northern kingdom of Israel.

David reigned over Judah for seven years, quickly building it into an even more secure and powerful entity than it was during the time of Saul. But Ishbaal proved a highly unsatisfactory choice for the northern kingdom. In short order, David's army conquered the army of Ishbaal, the people of the northern kingdom revolted against Ishbaal and assassinated him. The leaders of the northern kingdom, recognizing the untenable position they were in, then approached David and requested that he accept the crown of the northern kingdom as well as the southern kingdom, and merge them into one nation (4:1--5:5).

The elders of Israel wanted David to be their king for three reasons. First, he was their kin ("Look, we are your bone and flesh" 5:1). They were all Israelites, descendants of one of the twelve sons of Israel (Jacob) (cf. 19:12-13; Gen. 29:14; Judges 9:2). Second, he had proven his military prowess. Consequently, David offered to Israel the potential for a lasting peace and security through the elimination of its national enemies (5:2,¹ cf. I Sam. 17:32, 45-47; 18:7; 25:28). Third, David had been divinely appointed to Israel's throne and had been anointed by Israel's greatest judge, Samuel, toward that end (vs. 2, "The Lord said to you: It is you who shall be shepherd of my people Israel"). This meant that the people were aware of Samuel's anointing and therefore God's choice of David as king over Israel (I Sam. 16:1). It was for these three reasons that the elders of Israel came to the king of Judah and requested him to become king over the entire nation. David accepted, and is king over the united nation for 33 years – years that indeed do bring stability, power and security to the nation (5:5).

An immediate problem besetting David, upon his ascension to the throne of a united Israel, was the choice of the capital. If he chose to remain in Hebron, the northern kingdom would be offended. And if he chose to reign in Gibeon, the southern kingdom would feel slighted. Where could he place his capital in a site equally acceptable to both the north and the south?

¹ The statement, "It was you who led out Israel and brought it in" was actually a reference to David's military power. That is, even during the reign of Saul, it was David who led the Israelite army out to battle against Israel's enemies and who brought them back in victory. David never lost a battle against Israel's enemies.

David decided that what he needed was a neutral city for his capital, one that was relatively centrally located in the united nation and yet one that had never been under the control of or had been conquered by any of the tribes of Israel. He settled on Urushalim², a Jebusite city high upon a mountain surrounded by deep valleys that made it difficult to siege. Although it was in the very heartland of Israel, it has never been conquered by the Israelites, probably because its topography made it so impregnable.

Urushalim was an ancient city, listed as a city in Egyptian texts dated 1850 BCE, and mentioned in the Bible for the first time in Genesis 14:17-24 in the story of Abraham's meeting with its king, Melchizedek, around 2,000 BCE. Archaeological excavations of the city reveal that it was a small walled city in the Early Bronze Age during the third millennium before the Common Era. So by the time David determined that it would be his capital, Urushalim was already over 1,000 and perhaps even nearly 3,000 years old.

The account of David's taking of Urushalim is simply enough (5:6-10). The Jebusites felt confident that their natural and human-made defenses would be more than adequate to once again defeat Israel's attempt to take the city. But David did not attempt to breach those sturdy defenses. Instead, he sent a small contingent of troops through the watercourse into the city. Stealing into the city at night, they opened the gates and David's army rushed into the city, taking it by surprise and quickly subduing its Jebusite occupants. Not only did the city fall to David, but most of its infrastructure remained in place because it had not been subjected to attack! Thus, the author of II Samuel testifies, "David became greater and greater; for the Lord, the God of hosts, was with him" (5:10). God, who leads the armies of heaven also led Israel in this battle through the faithful leadership of David, and thus gave this city into the hands of the Israelites!

The conquering of Urushalim was one of the most important actions of David's monarchy. This city, of course, became Jerusalem – not only the capital of the new Israelite monarchy, but "the city of David", the city that became the abode of Israel's Temple and the center of Israel's economy. It became the abode of Israel's political, economic and religious powers that formed and sustained it as a nation. Eventually, it became a worldwide city (as put by Isaiah, "a house of prayer for all the peoples", 56:7), the center of three international religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam), and the model of the city as God intends it someday to be (Rev. 21-22). And its theological, political and economic importance for three millennia is caught up in its very name.

Since the root name for Jerusalem is Urushalim (that is, "Foundation of Shalem" in Hebrew and, likely, in the Canaanite tongue), the question must be asked, "Who was Shalem?" Shalem was the local god of pre-Israelite Canaan. It was the god symbolized in the planet Venus, the evening star – a god of nature and of fertility. After the Israelite conquest of Canaan, Shalem was identified with the Canaanite gods Ashtar and Molech. These gods were in reality, the Canaanite manifestations of the deity worshipped throughout the Near East – Ba'al. And it would be Ba'al

² There are a number of names given to this city before the time of David, both in biblical accounts and in independent secular accounts. The Egyptian Execration Texts name the city as Urushalim around 1850 BCE. It was also named "Shalem" (Psalm 76:2), "Salem" (Gen. 14:18), "Zion" (II Kings 19:21; Isaiah 2:3) and "Jebus" (Judges 19:10). But "Urushalim" seemed to be the name for the city that was most used before the time of David.

that would become, in Israelite theology, the origin of the figure of Satan! Thus, the name for that city of Urushalim expressed the city's devotion to the God Shalem or (in other words) Ba'al.³

If the city Urushalim or Shalem means "foundation of Shalem" or the city of Shalem, what, then, does the prefix *Je* mean? It is the anglicized version of the Hebrew word "Yah", and thus an abbreviation for the word "Yahweh". When King David conquered Jerusalem, he didn't change the name of the city. Rather, what he did was to add the prefix, "Yah" (or "Je") to the city's old name "Urushalim". Thus, David added Israel's God to the name of a city that had previously been named for the god Shalem. The name Yahweh was not substituted for the name of Shalem; it was added to it! Under David, this city now had the name, "City of Yahweh; City of Shalem".

In a most profound sense, David had captured in his new name for his new capital city the tension of every city. Just as was the case in Jerusalem, so it is the case in your city or in mine that our city is, at one and the same time, the City of Yahweh and the City of Ba'al, the City of God and the City of Satan! Every city is *Jeru-salem* – the city of Ba'al (or Satan). And yet, every city is *Je-usalem* – the city of God. Both Jerusalem and every city is city that contains the power and influence of both forces within its borders or walls. The very name of Israel's primary and idealized city expresses the foundational urban message of the Bible. Jerusalem – and every city – is the battleground between the forces of God and the forces of Satan for domination of its people and their structures. And that battle goes on in every one of us!

Little did David realize that in his act to capture and then rename Urushalim to Jerusalem, he was symbolizing and even predicting the course of his own tenure as Israel's monarch. He would be the king "who was after God's own heart", whose spontaneous love for God (6:1-23) expressed itself in magnificent psalms of praise (22:2—23:7 and many Psalms), who would seek to act justly to protect the powerless (9:1-13) and to share wealth in order to protect the cause of the poor (12:1-6). He would seek to build a City (and nation) of God.

But David would also be a poignant example of good gone awry, of adultery and murder, intrigue and deceit. He would, at times, be dominating, greedy, lustful and power-mad – the very essence of *Shalem* (e.g., 11:1-15; 11:16-27; 15:1-31). And the consequence of David's acting out his own dark side was rebellion, mass murder of his own people, and the enmity of his own children. The final years of David's rule were years of tragedy (13:1-22; 14:1-24- 16:1-14; 18:1-33; 20:1-22) – because he had unwittingly built a city of Satan as well as a city of God, of political systems of lust and power as well as justice, economic systems of greed as well as sharing, religious systems of control and domination as well as of dynamic relationship with God. Thus, David, and David's reign was as much "Urushalim" as it was "Jerusalem"!

³ It is often asserted that the name, Jerusalem, should be read as "city of peace" or "shalom". Is there a relationship between the Hebrew, "shalem" and "shalom"? Apparently there is. In the Canaanite language, the god's name *Shalem*, actually meant "completion". This meaning evolved from the Canaanites' perception of Shalem as Venus, the evening star – which "completed" the day. Therefore, as time went on and language evolved, the word *shalem* came to be identified with a place – *Jeru-shalem* – and thus with the concept of "completion", "fullness" or "welfare". This became the base for the later Israelite word *shalom* or "peace". But one should not then make the mistake of assuming that the name of David's city was *Jeru-shalom*. It was not! It was *Jeru-shalem*.

Psalm 48 is every urban dweller's 23rd Psalm! It is a tribute to Jerusalem (see the Old Testament lesson above) and to God's actions in protecting and making it his own!

The "urban dwellers 23rd Psalm" begins by reminding us that God is found primarily in *the* city – Jerusalem. God is "most worthy of praise, in the city of our God" (vs. 1). God's presence in the city makes it "beautiful in its loftiness, the joy of the whole earth," this "city of the Great King" (and "the Great King" is a reference to Yahweh, not to David) (v. 2)!

Why is Jerusalem to be celebrated as the abode of God? It is because "God is in her citadels; he has shown himself to be her fortress" (v. 3). God became Jerusalem's fortress when Israel's political order learned to trust God rather than its own defense. God defeated an enemy whom Israel's army could not defeat. God, this passage is stating, can enter into the political process and transform it. God can change the premises and the actions of the political order and can "convert" it from defense to acceptance and trust. Even in such a pragmatic science as politics, God can act as Savior and Lord – if people allow him to do so.

What was the event about which the psalmist is here writing? What was the occurrence that caused Israel to put such trust in God? We do not know! The second section of this psalm – verses 4-7 – gives us only the vaguest of hints. It could have been the unsuccessful campaign of Syria and Israel against Ahaz, king of Judah, in 735 BCE (II Kings 16:5-6). Alternatively, it could have been the famed siege of Jerusalem by Sennacherib of Assyria, recorded in both II Kings 19 and Isaiah 36-37. Or it could even have been a third event with which we are not familiar.

But whichever event it was, the point of this psalm is that God acted at a moment of grave national threat to protect Jerusalem in the midst of its vulnerability. That protection affirmed what Israel had long proclaimed – that God protected the city in which Yahweh dwelled. There is something deeply thrilling about the way verse 8 is translated in the Jerusalem Bible:

"What we had heard we saw for ourselves in the city of our God, the city of Yahweh Sabaoth, God-protected forever".

The people singing this psalm give witness to a crucial faith-step that they are taking together. Each of them had heard all their lives that God protects their city. Well, now they have seen it with their own eyes! Now they have seen that assurance in action! What was at one time a step of faith had now become a step of sight! They saw God in action! They saw God do what none of them or all of them together could do. The children of Israel have experienced for themselves what they have always been taught: that God loves the city, protects it, and invests himself in its future. We can believe that truth as well – and be open and perceptive to experience it for ourselves!

The third section of Psalm 48 begins with a prayer of thanksgiving for God's defense of the city. "God, in your Temple we reflect on your love; God, your praise, like your name, reaches to the ends of the world. Your right hand holds the victory; Mount Zion rejoices, the daughters of Judah exult to have your rulings" (vss. 9-11). The reputation of God's love for and commitment to his city, the psalmist writes, has gone to the very ends of the earth. Not only God's people,

but even those in the suburbs and towns around Jerusalem, in fact even those who are the despisers of God around the world and the nations that reject his authority must admit God's commitment to the city!

But then the psalm moves in a most unpredictable and striking direction. One expects that the psalmist would now launch into a celebration of God's power and love. But he does not! Instead, he begins to celebrate not God – but the city itself! The psalmist writes,

“Go through Zion, walk around her. Count her towers, admire her towers, review her palaces, that you may tell of them to the next generation” (vv. 12-13).

I can envision the psalmist walking – perhaps even skipping – down Jerusalem's streets, effusively pointing first with one hand and then the other as he directs the eyes of the people he escorts. “Look over there,” he says. “Look at that magnificent building – its height, the detail of its stone work, the exquisitely carved doorway! And look, look on the other side of the street. Note that enormous wall – one hundred and twenty feet high it is! And it is anchored on bedrock twelve feet below! And notice the enclosed bridge that arches over the street and connects the wall with the building! Isn't that a truly beautiful and symmetrical arch? And as we pass the arch, look to your left between the two buildings. Do you now see the little courtyard nestled between them? Look at its inviting fountain and the shade of its trees. Just imagine sitting there in the cool of the afternoon, shielded from the noise of the street and the burning of the sun, and quietly reading the Torah. *God made all that!*”

“*God made all that!*” How would we feel about our city if we began walking its streets, admiring its buildings, and reviewing its exquisite architecture? And what a difference it would make if we could begin viewing our city, not through eyes that saw only its dirt and deprivation, but through eyes that could recognize the handiwork of the Creator. God created the city even as he created the mountains and hills and trees and brooks. In the countryside God has used the forces of nature to carve and shape and mold. In the city, God has used the creativity of human beings to carve and shape and mold! The city is to be celebrated and admired, not simply for itself, but because the city is the creation and primary abode of God.

For the reality of the Old Testament is that God is not found in the countryside – in the hills, the rivers, the grass, the lakes. The countryside was the site of the “high places” – the gathering places for the worship of Ba'al and Shalem, the natural “temples” of cult prostitution (Lev. 26:30; Num. 33:52; Deut. 33:29; I Kings 12:31; 13:32; II Kings 17:32; 23:9; Psalm 78:58). Yahweh was found in his capital city of Jerusalem and in his “palace”, the Temple! The city is the creation and primary abode of God!

As Psalm 48 nears its end, the Jerusalem Bible translates its closing sentence in a way that I find particularly meaningful. “Tell the next generation that God is here, our God and leader forever and ever” (v. 14)!

“Tell the next generation that God is here”! This is the psalmist's instruction to God's people; celebrate the city in order to keep reminding its occupants that this is a city of God, that God is here “forever and ever”. It is precisely because the church has failed over the centuries to “tell

the next generation that God is here” that God’s people have come to emphasize what is dark and evil about the city and have missed the concrete truth that God is there! Many of the church have fled the city to the more “conducive” climes of suburb and countryside, seeking God in woods and mountains and peaceful places specifically forbidden by the Old Testament! As a result, the church has unconsciously moved in a pantheistic direction and has largely abandoned God’s primary abode -- the city. The issue is not that God has abandoned the Jerusalems of the world as much as it is that God’s people have abandoned the cities and have taken their household gods with them.

If we have eyes to see, we can still look around our city and there “count her towers, admire her walls, review her palaces” and discover that what we have heard we now see for ourselves – that “this God is our God forever and ever; he will be our guide even to the end” (Psalm 48:14)!

Mark 6:1-13 is the story of the response to Jesus by his townspeople and a subsequent response to his disciples. In the first account, Jesus is rejected by the people of Nazareth; the scripture tells us that “they took offense at him” (6:3b). Their statement in response to Jesus’ teaching is particularly telling: “Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands? Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?” (vv. 2b-3) In other words, they are saying, “Who does this man think he is? We have known him all his life. He grew up here. We know his family. And we know he is nothing more than a common laborer who has neither formal religious training nor academic credentials. And now he thinks he can teach us? Who does he think he is anyway?” In other words, they are insulted by his attempt to teach them. At least as far as this prophet is concerned, familiarity bred contempt, not a willingness to listen and learn (vs. 4)!

It is noteworthy that this rejection is not limited to Jesus’ fellow townspeople. Even his family and his wider circle of relatives (“one’s own kin and one’s own household” – vs. 4) reject him and his testimony. Not even his own family will give him the benefit of the doubt!

This rejection greatly hurts Jesus. Mark tells us “he could do no deed of power there” and “was amazed at their unbelief” (vss. 5, 6). This blatant rejection hinders Jesus’ ability to do deeds of power among them; at the most, he can only “lay his hands on a few sick people and cure them” (vs. 5b). The participation by the people in such great works through the exercise of their faith is strategic to Jesus’ effectiveness to transform situations; the people are not observers, but participants! So their rejection of Jesus results in their own rejection of what he is capable of doing in their midst!

The response to the disciples in another venue is strikingly different. Mark tells us that Jesus sent them out “two by two among the villages” of Galilee. There, they healed the sick, cast out demons and taught the word. Jesus instructed them “to take nothing for their journey except a staff”, to bless every house with shalom into which they were invited, and to “shake off the dust that is on your feet” to any village or house that rejected them. And the text tells us, “So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them” (vss. 12-13). So the disciples were enabled to do many

good works because the populace was open to them, received them enthusiastically, and had faith in the work of transformation they had come to do! They were, therefore, the exact opposite of the people of Nazareth.

Mark is seeking to present in these two parallel stories more than simply receptivity or rejection of Christ. What he is communicating is that all of Jesus' ministry up to this point (1:1—5:43) had been one both of calling the political-economic-religious system of Israel and its leaders to accountability and beginning the creation of an alternate community of shalom to that system. Jesus is, essentially, challenging the status quo of Israel, making powerful enemies, and working to create a new order (the "kingdom of God") that would be in opposition to Israel's systems. He is therefore extremely revolutionary – even radical, and identification with him is consequently dangerous.

Jesus' ministry, in particular, scandalized the people of his neighborhood; it upset the status quo. His very association with them as a "son" of Nazareth threatened not only the citizens of Nazareth, but his extended family, as well. They were afraid that they would become tainted by his actions, that the principalities and powers would conclude that Jesus came out of a revolutionary atmosphere in Nazareth and might seek to crush that spirit. The people were threatened by Jesus' ministry. And so they sought ways to dismiss him – time-honored ways for dismissing the impact of a man. They belittled his lack of formal education. They made light of his occupation as a carpenter. They criticized his family as being a family of little consequence in their city. They avoided him and would not believe in him. And their attitude was sure to limit his effectiveness in ministering in his hometown. The people of Nazareth were intimidated by Jesus and the controversy he had stirred up. And so they sought to distance themselves from him as much as possible. And that distancing included not only the townspeople, but his relatives and his own maternal household, as well!

Thus, Jesus must create a new household, a new kinship system, a new family. Recognizing that he is now a disowned "prophet without honor", Jesus withdraws from the close familial and neighborhood ties of the past to begin in earnest the creation of a new community, a new family in God, and a new political-economic-religious order (the "kingdom of God"). And he recognizes that this new order can only be built among strangers! Thus, he sends forth his disciples two-by-two to discover that potential community among those whom they meet or heal or teach or stay in their homes across all of Galilee. And among those former strangers, Jesus will build his alternative community to that of Israel, a community with all of its conflicts, its tragedies as well as victories, its struggle to understand and embrace the mission to which Jesus calls it. He and they go out with "no bread, no bag, no money in their belts" to build together the shalom community in the midst of a Yahweh-aware society that rejects all that Yahweh was about because of their fear of the dominating "principalities and powers" of their world.

II Corinthians 12:2-10. In the Epistle Lesson for the 14th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Paul reveals how he was "caught up to the third heaven"⁴ (12:2), where he observed things

⁴ In Jewish mystical thinking of the first century in the Common Era, there were three heavens. The "first heaven" was the atmosphere of birds and clouds. The "second heaven" was the firmament of the stars that the ancients saw as a sort of "cap" or arch over the world upon which the stars and planets were fixed. The "third heaven" was the

unimaginable to humanity, “heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat” (vs. 4). He says nothing more about this experience – simply that he had the experience. But the purpose of this mystical experience was to confirm to Paul that the directions of his ministry and the priorities that he was insisting upon were of God, and therefore were right. Consequently, this meant that Paul was not going to be easily dissuaded from maintaining these directions and priorities, no matter what arguments were placed before him or what power plays were conducted. He had been shown by God the rightness of the intent of his mission, and he was not to be convinced otherwise!

Paul then goes on to say that, in order “to keep from being too elated (by this experience), a thorn was given to me in the flesh” (vs. 7). We don’t know what that “thorn” might have been, but there are intriguing clues. Paul’s thorn in the flesh could have been an illness or disability of some sort or it could have been the grief brought to him by many of his churches or from Jewish-Christian opposition. He never states what the thorn is (although he alludes in 10:1-10 to a kind of ailment that either made him appear repulsive to others or which affected his speaking).

Whatever that thorn might have been, what was important was not the identification of the thorn itself, but how Paul chose to respond to it. He wrote in today’s epistle lesson, “Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, ‘my grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness’ (12:8)”. What God’s words said to Paul is that not all suffering is meant to be removed nor all difficulties meant to be resolved. Some of the tragedies with which we must cope, whether short-term or life-long, enables us to know the divine strength that can be at work even in human weakness. But to access that strength requires us to surrender our need for resolution and relief. God will work through Paul and accomplish His purposes in spite of a “thorn” that might remain. In fact, that “thorn” may create a level of dependence upon and trust in God in the way that good health or good fortune will not. It is God’s “grace that is sufficient for you” as God builds the power we exercise through our vulnerability and weakness. Despite our human weakness, God’s grace will accomplish God’s purposes in and through us and will consequently enable us to impact the world as it is, even when we are surrounded by our own inadequacies and vulnerabilities.

Thus it is that Paul concludes this scripture lesson with the lesson he has learned from the thorn in his life. “Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions and calamities for the sake of Christ – *for whenever I am weak, then I am strong*” (12:10)! The power of God at work in our lives and through our actions, that power that gives us the capacity, ability and willingness to act for Christ and His Kingdom, comes out of our vulnerability, our pain, our heart broken over those things that break God’s heart in our heartless world. For when we are weak, then God is strong through us and, consequently, then we are strong!

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abode of God, heaven itself that lay behind the arch of the firmament. Thus, when Paul refers in II Cor. 12:2 to having been “caught up to the third heaven”, he is stating that he had a vision in which God took him to heaven where he could experience its fullness without having to die.