

# Ordinary

by Jonathan Holston

July 12, 2009

2 Samuel 6:1-5, 126-19; Psalm 24;  
Ephesians 1:3-14; Mark 6:14-29

George Zimmer, the founder of the Men's Warehouse clothing stores, made his first television commercial in 1986. Staring into the camera, he made a promise that has become familiar to us all; namely, "You're going to like the way you look. I guarantee it." A little known fact is that Zimmer made a mistake. He was not supposed to say, "I guarantee it." He was scripted to say, "That is the fact, Jack," which is a catchphrase actor Bill Murray made popular in the movie "Stripes." Yet this simple promise resonated with people and made them visit one of his stores.

That promise is not different from what is shared in these lectionary scriptures. The promise of God's presence is the cornerstone in our relationship of faith and witness. Because God is a keeper of promises – to love us, forgive us, care for us, and to be present with us.

2 Samuel 6 is the story of King David bringing the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem. The promise is that wherever the ark resided, the community would be blessed with God's presence. When David brings the Ark to Jerusalem, he associates his rule with the lordship, power, and presence of God. The realization of the presence of God in our midst is the assurance that things will go better for us. David dances before the ark as an expression of adoration and praise toward the presence of God that is surely there.

The presence of God is certainly cause for celebration, as David and the house of Israel demonstrated. The psalmist, however, cautions us that to enter into God's presence, we must stand

with honesty and integrity. God is present with us when the congregation worships together. Often we get into patterns and practices that are manipulative and cause worship to toe the thin line between engagement and entertainment. Some people are sincerely trying to find a way to experience God's presence and do not know what to do. Psalm 24 reminds us that we must come with "clean hands and pure hearts" and "not lift up [our] souls to what is false."

July 19, 2009

2 Samuel 7:1-14a; Psalm 89:20-37;  
Ephesians 2:11-22; Mark 6:30-34

After eight years, I was moving to a new appointment. My wife and I had an excellent meeting with the staff-parish relations committee at our new place of ministry. In fact, it was better than expected. Because this was our first venture into a cross-racial appointment, we flippantly wondered when the proverbial shoe would drop. Then I received the "call" the next day at nine o'clock. The caller introduced himself as the spokesperson for his group and asked, "What do we call you? Are you Black, Negro, or African American?" Stunned by the question, I responded in like fashion—"What do you call me?" The answer came quickly and with the divisiveness of days gone by—"I am from the south and we call you "colored."

After gathering my thoughts, I felt a need to inquire of my questioner. I replied, "I have a problem as well; namely, "What do I call you? Are you White, Caucasian, or European American?" After

a long pause, he simply said, “Touché.” That conversation had the opportunity of dividing us but ended with a blessed discovery of hope. We decided to call each other by the names our parents gave us and today we are the best of friends.

In Ephesians 2:11-12, Paul reminds us that because of Christ, we are a part of the household of God. God, in Christ, seeks harmony and unity. It is our propensity for division that stands in the way. In this biblical drama, it is a split between Jews and Gentiles. In our present-day world, the divisions are between conservatives and liberals, young and old, black and white, undocumented and citizens, the affluent and the poor.

It is God, in the form of Christ, who steps into those places where we say and do things that deepen divisions. The holy work of creating anew requires that we remember that you were without Christ, being aliens of the commonwealth of Israel and having no hope and without God in the world.” This work requires that we let go of our prejudices and embrace a greater understanding of unity. God, in Christ, wants to dwell in the hearts and souls of God’s people, regardless of what they call themselves.

July 26, 2009

2Samuel 11:1-15; Psalm 14; Ephesians 3:14-21; John 6:1-21

Bishop Woodie White tells a story of a new drug store that was built in his community. He celebrated the new business for its proximity to the community. Instead of driving miles and miles for service, these basic services were now within walking distance. One particular day, he drove home and was bewildered. He knew there had been another building on that very lot this new drugstore was being built. Several days later, he remembered and was saddened. He remembered that a church was on the lot. He was stunned. How could a place of worship—where the presence of God, in Christ, was celebrated and the faith was practiced—close and be demol-

ished without anyone taking notice? After much thought, he said, “We simply forgot.” We are constantly reminded that we are flawed people and often forget God’s place in our lives.

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In 2 Samuel 11:1-15, we are stunned, dumfounded, and flabbergasted. What else can be said after reading the story of David and Bathsheba? This was the great King David who brought the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem with much fanfare. This is King David who had seen the power, might, and presence of God with his own eyes. Then a simple walk on the roof made him forget all of that. These are the storylines of daytime soap opera fare; namely, violation, adultery, misplaced loyalties, arrogance, deception, and murder. David simply forgot God’s action in his life.

Jesus’ disciples are no different than David. As John 6 begins, the Passover is approaching. The crowd follows him and experiences Jesus’ extraordinary ministry. As the day grows long and the crowd grows hungry, the disciples grow fearful. No matter what they see Jesus do or what they hear him teach, they seem to forget. The passage shares the message of Jesus feeding a crowd of thousands with five barley loaves and two fish, as well as Jesus walking on the water. Each time the disciples fear was evident. They simply forgot God’s actions in Christ, done in their presence.

Paul shares in Ephesians 3:14-21 a prayer for remembrance; one of strength that Christ dwells in our hearts, the power of comprehension and the love of Christ. If we can remember and not forget, the power of God will allow all of us “to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can

ask or imagine.” *August 2, 2009*

2 Samuel 11:26-12:13a; Psalm 51:1-12p; Ephesians 4:1-16; John 6:24-35

Upon being appointed to a new congregation, a pastor conducted a survey to examine people’s impressions of the church. To his amazement, no one spoke of their worship service or ministry in the community, but commented that this church had the prettiest stained glass windows! Sharing this information with the congregation, he sought to redefine their perception in the community to one that was based not on appearances, but on fruitful ministry.

On a visit to the local hospital, the pastor stumbled upon a great opportunity for ministry. The hospital administration told him of their need for stuffed animals for children who were admitted to the hospital. The pastor shared with the congregation the vision of collecting teddy bears for the hospital, and the church ended up collecting more stuffed animals than any group in town. Visiting a local supermarket, a clerk recognized him as the pastor of that church and responded, “That is the church that gives teddy bears to the children.” What a difference! Even though they still had the pretty stained-glass windows, their ministry to children in the community became the central focus. The congregation had opened their hearts to God’s love and grace.

From David’s standpoint, his problems were solved. Even though he knew he had coveted his neighbor’s wife, committed adultery, and committed murder, nobody knew of his deceit. Everything looked perfect from the outside, but nothing got past God. 2 Samuel 12:1 states, “The Lord sent Nathan to David.” Nathan uses a parable that helped David see himself as the perpetrator of a great injustice. David responds with godly confession and sorrow, which brings him back to wholeness and a right relationship with God. His response opens his mind to the wisdom of repentance, redemption, and restoration to the godly life and leadership to which he was called.

Paul reminds us in Ephesians 4:1-16 to “lead a

life worthy of the calling to which you have been called.” Paul speaks to the Ephesians about the calling to live an active and alive faith. Through humility, gentleness and long suffering, we bear witness to the world of God’s power. To obey this directive from God is to be challenged. The ministries that God calls us are many and varied. We are to open our ears to God’s call to witness.

*August 9, 2009*

2 Samuel 18:5-9, 15, 31-33; Psalm 130; Ephesians 4:25-5:2; John 6:35, 41-51

There are situations in life that I will never understand. In fact, life is filled with so many heart-wrenching human dramas that are impossible to understand. Recently, a young man vandalized and robbed an electronics store. He took several large screen televisions and seemed to get away with it, but he was easily apprehended later that day. It seems that on his way out of the store, the thief took the time to complete an extended warranty form and included his home address. Friends, there is no way to understand that behavior.

Twenty-three years ago, a young man in my youth group was convicted of taking the life of a cab driver. He was a good son to his parents but found himself with the wrong crowd. I do not understand the circumstances but I have observed that his parents have not stopped loving him. They do not agree with his actions, but it has not diminished their love for their son.

Today’s passage from 2 Samuel shares a difficult message for parents. This passage records the death of Absalom, the son of King David. Absalom organized a plot to overthrow his father and become king. Nonetheless, when Absalom died, David mourned greatly. When children are born, they have a part of your heart. No matter how old they are, rebellious and out of sorts they are, or even how supportive they are, they are still your son or daughter. When our children do well, we celebrate their accomplishments. When they are not successful, we are saddened with

them. In other words, we are vulnerable to these folk we love. Even though Absalom's death is brought on by David's indiscretion, that does not diminish his love for his son.

In Ephesians, Paul addresses our ability to hurt one another and the need to love one another as family members in Christ. These words help us seek ways to be reconciled in positive and proactive ways. Paul advises that the attitude of gratitude is one of love and adoration. We learn to walk in love with one another and act in ways that do not distance us from others. The examples given speak directly to our relationships shared at home, where we work, worship and relax. It only takes a moment to cause pain which often needs a lifetime of healing.

Fortunately, God has provided the ultimate example of the kind of love we are to have for one another. In John's gospel, Jesus reveals that God has sent him as a sacrifice; the love of the father for his children is the exchange of his life for ours.

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ugust 16, 2009

1 Kings 2:10-12, 3:3-14; Psalm 111; Ephesians 5:15-20; John 6:51-58

As we returned from our first confirmation retreat, we stopped at a restaurant for breakfast. Approaching the register, the cashier looked at me and asked, "Are you the bus driver?" My hesitance seemed to signal a problem to her. The confirmands and their parents gasped. We all realized that some stereotypes go away slowly. I was the only African American in our group, and for this cashier, her experience indicated that must be the driver of the bus. The manager scrambled from the back of the kitchen to get to the counter. Calmly, I said "no," and pointed to the driver. I sensed the cashier's embarrassment and said, "Don't worry we, all make mistakes." She was a part of her present community and now was ushered into an opportunity for new understanding. She was empowered. Her mind

would never be the same.

In our text, Solomon felt the awesome responsibility of leadership as he assumed the throne of his father, David. He recognized the legacy left by his father and the expectations of the people. God comes to Solomon in a dream and asks, "What should I give you?" Like a child, he confesses his need for wisdom and discernment. Rather than request the riches of his office, Solomon desired only wisdom to rightly govern the people. This humility underscores the depth of his character. God honors his request and adds the blessings of wealth and long life as well. When we stand before God with honesty, we are empowered to seek wholeness in ourselves, in our relationships, in our work for the world, and in our lives before God.

Our world is filled with opportunities of goodness and hatred, life and death, light and darkness. Paul admonishes the Ephesian church community to "be careful how you live," to practice discernment in their behaviors and interactions. This is a call to remembrance—to remember we are in community with God and with one another.



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