

**Altavista Presbyterian Church
Rev. Eduardo Soto, Jr.**

**“An Unusual Haunting”
II Corinthians 9:1-7
I Samuel 16:14-23**

**Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
July 22, 2018**

II Corinthians 8:1-7

We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints—and this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us. Accordingly, we urged Titus that as he had started, so he should complete among you this act of grace. But as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all earnestness, and in our love for you—see that you excel in this act of grace also.

I Samuel 16:14-23

Now the Spirit of the Lord departed from Saul, and a harmful spirit from the Lord tormented him. And Saul's servants said to him, "Behold now, a harmful spirit from God is tormenting you. Let our lord now command your servants who are before you to seek out a man who is skillful in playing the lyre, and when the harmful spirit from God is upon you, he will play it, and you will be well." So Saul said to his servants, "Provide for me a man who can play well and bring him to me." One of the young men answered, "Behold, I have seen a son of Jesse the Bethlehemite, who is skillful in playing, a man of valor, a man of war, prudent in speech, and a man of good presence, and the Lord is with him." Therefore, Saul sent messengers to Jesse and said, "Send me David your son, who is with the sheep." And Jesse took a donkey laden with bread and a skin of wine and a young goat and sent them by David his son to Saul. And David came to Saul and entered his service. And Saul loved him greatly, and he became his armor-bearer. And Saul sent to Jesse, saying, "Let David remain in my service, for he has found favor in my sight." And whenever the harmful spirit from God was upon Saul, David took the lyre and played it with his hand. So Saul was refreshed and was well, and the harmful spirit departed from him.

“An Unusual Haunting”

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the Word of the Lord remains forever. Friends, this is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing and acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

There are things in this world that scare me. Spiders being number one. Wasps following in a close second. But there's one thing in particular that scares me the most. And that is being absent from the presence of God. I cannot fathom the sense of loss and confusion at the absence of God. To have God turn his back on me is something I don't ever want to imagine. And yet that's exactly what happened to King Saul. Samuel tells us that the Spirit of the Lord departed from Saul. Saul remained king for the rest of his life, but he no longer knew the power and presence of God. That's frightening.

The imagery that comes to my mind is that of a ship adrift at sea without a captain. One summer Betsy and I went to upstate New York to visit a friend from seminary. While we were there, the three of us were invited to take a ride on a sailboat in the Great Sacandaga Lake. That was my first time ever in a sailboat. It was both exhilarating and terrifying. You have to have five arms and three sets of eyes to pilot a sailboat on your own. I was really happy to have an experienced captain

at the helm. To be on a boat without a seasoned captain is how I would equate being without God. That Saul stayed alive as long as he did is a clear testimony that God's hand was still at work. Not for Saul's benefit, mind you, but for David's.

For you see, our passage this morning follows on the heels of last week's passage, where we read of Samuel's clandestine anointing of David as God's true king for Israel. The tables have turned in the narrative of Israel's monarchy. Saul's disobedience to God's commands afforded him God's rejection. We cannot forget that Saul made the conscience decision to ignore God's demands. That was a perilous decision, which stemmed from human pride. Calvin says this about world leaders: "So infatuated are they by their own splendor and magnificence, as to imagine that the whole world was made only for them." Calvin continues, "although men occupy thrones and judgement-seats, God nevertheless continues to hold the office of supreme ruler."¹ Arrogance was Saul's downfall. And from Calvin's perspective, nine out of ten leaders suffer from the same arrogance. When Saul allowed this arrogance to fill his heart, it meant there was no room for God. Saul was tormented because of the positive absence of God in his life.

But notice, this story is no longer about Saul. Saul's narrative is taking a backseat to David's narrative. Samuel is no longer concerned about recording Saul's and God's relationship, but rather begins to transition his focus onto David's and God's relationship. We know this is the case because Saul's servants, who see him being haunted, say to him, "Let us take leave to seek out someone who is a skillful and talented musician, whose music can soothe not only the soul, but the mind as well." The power of music has been known throughout history. The way a song can move our emotions was not lost on the ancients. And it is no accident that song has a spiritual quality, for music, just like everything else that is beautiful and good, comes to us from God himself.

Knowing this, the servant tells Saul of a talented musician. But look at his description. "Behold, I have seen a son of Jesse the Bethlehemite, who is *skillful in playing*, a *man of valor*, a *man of war*, *prudent* in speech, and a man of *good presence*, and *the Lord is with him*." That's quite the résumé for a court musician. The servant could have ended his description at "skillful in playing." I'm sure that would have been enough for Saul to trust his servant's recommendation. But God is doing something different, something special. Samuel is setting up the story to reveal that David is actually qualified to be king. He is a man of valor. He is brave, courageous, bold, valiant, heroic. He is a man of war. A tactician, skilled fighter, adept at arms. Characteristics usually used to describe mythic heroes. He is prudent in speech. Wise, discerning, perceptive, intelligent. He is a man of good presence. Comely, beautiful, charming. Characteristics usually used to describe great leaders. David is everything that the Israelites saw in their neighboring kings. Yet, David had something more. He had something better than charisma, better than intelligence, better than tactics and valor. For the Lord was with him.

Paul told the church in Philippi, "I can do all things through him who strengthens me." Paul had learned to be content in whatever situation befell him. And that was not always positive. Paul was imprisoned for the Gospel. He was eventually executed because of his commitment to the Gospel. Paul's contentedness was not abject acceptance, but a hope-filled recognition that God was on his side. This unknown servant of Saul somehow knew that God was with David. David definitely agreed with Paul that his strength and charisma and form all come from God. And we'll see that

admission later when David stands before Goliath. For now, it is important to note that the one with whom the Lord was present, entered into the service of the one to whom the Lord rejected.

Remember, Saul remained king. He was still in a position of privilege and power. He's the number one man in all of Israel, yet God is not with him. Instead, God is with the seventh son of a sheep herder. Little did Saul know, but he would come to rue the day David entered his court. For now, whenever the harmful spirits haunted Saul, David would play the lyre and the spirits would leave. When God's blessing and grace is in your life, no demons, no harmful spirits can assail you. I look out into the world and I see people who have it all. People who are rich beyond my imagination. Influential beyond my reasoning. Yet, those who do not know Christ, who are not born again under his blood and live under his command, regardless of their immense wealth and power, are either too blind to see their own damnation or too blind to see the true power and wealth of the Gospel. Jesus tells us not to store up treasures on earth, for earthly treasures, whether material or emotional or digital, will rot away. Rather, we are to store up treasures in heaven, where there is no decomposition, but life eternal and true life at that. Is God with you? Do you know for certain that his presence lingers over you and in you? If not, I invite you to turn to him. Seek his face, for God does not turn away from those who call upon his Son as Lord and Savior.

Let us pray. Almighty God, you empowered David to be your true king for Israel. You gave him his skills, his valor, his wisdom, and his character. But most of all, Lord, you were with him. Your presence with David established him as one of your chosen. Your presence set him on the track to fulfill your will for the nation of Israel and for the world. I ask that your same presence be with us, today. May your presence banish the haunting spirits of despair, anxiety, peer pressure, addiction, and temptation. May we, too, be empowered by your Gospel to speak your truth in love. May we not be blinded or distracted by earthly successes and failures, but stay focused on you. In name of our Savior and Lord Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.

¹ John Calvin, *Commentary on Psalms 82:1-4*.