

The Things Unsaid

A sermon on 2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12b-19 & Mark 6:14-29 by Craig Bartlett, 11 July 2021

I'm going to break one of the cardinal rules bequeathed to me by my homiletics professor at Emmanuel College in Toronto, Paul Scott Wilson. The rule he offered was, 'Don't talk about the process by which you prepared your sermon. It takes away from the impact of the proclamation.'

Two things are important in my prep for today. First, when one approaches texts with such drama in them, such as the First and Gospel readings for today, it's often useful to ask ourselves, 'Who am I in this story?' or 'With whom do I identify in this story?' In the First Reading, I identify with Michal, and I envision myself as perhaps one of her advisors or courtiers. And I'm left with a question: 'Why was Michal so disgusted with David and the dance he performed when bringing the sacred Ark into Jerusalem?'

The second principle I have followed in one that I think is useful for engaging with the Bible in general. I'm not of the persuasion that a given story within Scripture has to have only one meaning, and that if we 'have the Spirit', or do the right exegetical study, or meditate upon it for enough days and nights, that this one meaning will become evident to us. It seems to me that as we re-encounter the stories of the Scriptures again and again, we uncover yet another layer of meaning with each new reading, as we reconsider the things we've already learnt, and as we consider our life situations.

So why was Michal so 'oppin mad'? Was it because she saw David's dance as acting in an undignified, un-royal way? Was it because she thought David was improperly dressed? The linen ephod in which the text says David was dressed, from the artistic representations I've seen of it, was a priestly garment not much bigger than an apron. It may have been supported by a belt or shoulder straps, and it may or may not have covered both a person's front and back. Was it because she remembered the fact that David's investiture as king came at the expense of her father, Saul, and she couldn't let go of that resentment? Was it because she thought she could see through all of the ecstatic displays and ceremony and viewed it as just a calculated attempt on her conniving husband's part to consolidate his position as king?

If you read on in the sixth chapter of the Second Book of Samuel, the writer leans toward the 'lack of modesty/dignity' explanation, and this leads to a household spat between David and Michal, after which Michal 'had no children to the day of her death' (v.20, NRSV). And more questions enter my mind: Was this divine judgment? Was it a calculated move on David's part to make sure there were no more descendants of Saul to challenge him to the throne? Or was it simply because this relationship became 'frosty', as happens to many relationships? The writer doesn't say.

And considering the drama of the Gospel reading, it's difficult for me not to see the parallels between the Herod Antipas/John encounters, and the Pontius Pilate/Jesus encounters. While the actual history of these situations were probably different from the portrayals here (Pilate and Herod were likely quite willing to rid themselves of their nemeses, and the challenges they represented to the political powers they represented), I can't help wonder what the character of Herodias' daughter is going through. The portrayal of this character in the history of Western art is a fascinating one, especially if you've seen Strauss' opera Salome, complete with The Dance of the Seven Veils. Yet, in the text, the daughter is referred to in

Greek as *korasion* (κοράσιον), the same word to describe the 12 year-old girl resurrected by Jesus. How fair has it been of painters and dramatists and choreographers to portray this female as the epitome of female lust. How much desire did she have of her own, and how much was she a pawn in the psychological games of adults? The text of Mark's Gospel really doesn't take time to address this.

In these go-rounds with these stories, I wonder about the things that aren't explicitly stated in the texts. What's going on underneath the surface events? What are the emotions and thoughts churning under the surface in the minds and hearts of the characters? How would all these things unsaid work themselves out in future events?

These ideas from the readings for today are the guides by which I write the new chapter in my Faith-book, which might be called 'The Return'. After almost a quarter of a century away from my home and native land, and having been a 'done' (i.e., someone who was 'done' with organized religion) for seventeen of those 24½ years, I return to Canada, to my original spiritual home, the United Church of Canada. I return to small town Ontario, north of that bustling cluster of cities around the shores of Lake Ontario known as 'The Golden Horseshoe'. But just as you can 'never go home again', I am not going back to the same kind of place that I was in previously, twenty-eight years ago.

My home nation is dealing with specters of the past, as unmarked graves are discovered on the sites of former residential schools. We who are descendants of European settlers in what we now call Canada are being reminded of how much more work needs to be done to be truly reconciled with the First Nations, the Inuit, and the Metis Nation. It's getting uncomfortable, because we descendants of settlers and immigrants must accept that the process of 'killing the Indian to save the (hu)man' is part and parcel of Canada's founding narrative, going back to Sir John A MacDonald, our first Prime Minister and the first Father of Confederation. It's been hard enough to admit that the United Church of Canada and its founding denominations ran some of the residential schools. We must now digest that one of the architects of that system was Egerton Ryerson, Methodist minister and advocate for free public education in what is now Ontario. Yes, the United Church of Canada was the first to offer an apology to indigenous peoples for disregarding native culture and spirituality, and the congregations and councils of the church are expected to acknowledge the lands on which our congregations live, work, and worship are the lands of indigenous peoples. But that's the easy part – much harder work lies ahead.

Now, indigenous peoples aren't holding back anymore, and all the things which were left unsaid, or perhaps more accurately, weren't listened to, are being said with force. Churches have been burnt and splattered with paint and hand prints. Statues have been toppled and symbolically decapitated. Some indigenous leaders are forcefully talking about the 'reclamation of Turtle Island' (how some First Nations refer to the continent of North America) and "resisting the illegal occupation of indigenous lands by settler communities". The last time I recollect this type of language being used in Canadian history, a group of self-styled liberationists in 1960s Quebec decided that direct action was necessary. They started collecting involuntary taxes by robbing banks and armored trucks. They planted bombs in federal government buildings and blew up Canada Post mailboxes. They ended up kidnapping of two men, one of whom, a minister in the Quebec government, they killed. This resulted in the suspension of civil liberties and armed troops patrolling major Canadian

cities. You might say I'm being unnecessarily alarmist, but I remember the echoes of the October Crisis, and I'm not one to say that couldn't happen again.

What's the way forward? I'm not sure, and I don't think it will be easy. I will need to remember, though, whenever I am meeting with any representatives of any minority groups, be it Indigenous, Black, Persons of Color, or sexual minorities, that the good Lord gave me two ears and one mouth for a reason.

If there is a message of Good News worth proclaiming here, it is my experience of observing this community's process of transitioning to becoming a community which primarily worships and governs itself online. South Yarra Community Baptist Church took an intentionally slow, methodical process to make this decision, one which involved several occasions to listen to people as they offered their reflections, their opinions, their concerns, and their worries. People were allowed, even encouraged, to try out different modes of meeting, to see how they worked, and no permission had to be granted. Everyone understood that things had to be tried out, and 'tried on', to see how they fit. When it came to voting, people were allowed to share additional comments, so that even though the motion to transition to an online/hybrid form of worship and governance was carried unanimously, there was room for a comment like, 'I wish it didn't have to be this way'. Even at this final stage, room was made for those to express their grief over 'a good thing lost' – there was no expectation for those who may not have fully agreed to put up and shut up, or to get over it and move on.

Perhaps this is what I will take away with me from my time as a 'religious refugee', willingly and lovingly taken in by this community of faith, with little being asked of me, but receiving so much in return. I have seen an example of how ongoing issues in a faith community, including ones that could cause conflict and division, are to be dealt with – slowly, intentionally, with an aim to listen intensely; allowing all those present to speak their truth in love and humility; to hold differing points of view and different models of being and doing together, in creative tension if needed, but more often as a way of seeing how things work; and finding a way to move forward together, with as few things as possible 'left unsaid'. I receive this gift you have given me with much gratitude and thanks; and I will do my best to take this gift and use it as wisely as possible in the next chapter of my ongoing Faith-book.