

**Davidson College Presbyterian Church**  
**Davidson, North Carolina**  
**Lib McGregor Simmons, Pastor**  
**In Life and In Death, We Belong to God: The Mystery of God's Ways**  
**I Samuel 16: 1-13**  
**4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent**  
**March 26, 2017**

The people of Israel had wanted...had demanded...a king. So the prophet Samuel consulted with God, and Saul was anointed by Samuel as the first king of Israel.

But as is more often the case than not, when people get itchy for a change in leadership and then they actually get the change that they had been itching for, it turns out that the new isn't any better than the old.

And so it was with King Saul.

In the case of Saul, it was God who turned out to be the most disappointed of all in the leadership of Saul. In the chapter immediately preceding today's Scripture lesson from I Samuel 16, we read, "The word of the LORD came to Samuel: "I regret that I made Saul king, for he has turned back from following me, and has not carried out my commands." Samuel was angry, and he cried out to the LORD all night." (I Samuel 15: 10)

Thus the stage is set for what comes next, recounted in I Samuel 16: 1-13.

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This week has seen its share of messy politics.

It is timely then that we attend to two stories that involve some messy politics. The first is the story of the anointing of David as king of Israel. I'll circle back around to this story in a few minutes.

The second story isn't in the Bible. It is a mere 500 years old. Taken together, the two stories point us to the God to whom we belong no matter how noisy and messy our human politics may become.

The 500-year-old story is the story of the Heidelberg Catechism. The Heidelberg Catechism is one of the creeds, confessions, and catechisms that are a part of the Book of Confessions of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), our theological constitution, one might say. It is from the first question and answer of the Heidelberg Catechism that our theme for Lent 2017 comes, "In Life and In Death, We Belong to God," comes.

This year Protestants the world over are observing the 500th anniversary of the beginning of the Protestant Reformation, marked by Martin Luther's nailing of 95 Theses, his theological complaints against the Roman Church's practice of selling indulgences, on the door of the church in Wittenberg, Germany.

It wasn't long before things got really messy not only between Roman Catholics and Protestants, but among the Protestants themselves. And Heidelberg became ground zero for Protestant political infighting and messiness.

In brief, here is what happened...

The pastor of the Holy Ghost church in Heidelberg was Tilemann Hesshus. Hesshus had High Lutheran blood flowing through his veins. The assistant pastor was Wilhelm Klebitz. Klebitz was an ardent Calvinist. Today we might say that they were not "a good fit." They were not a good fit at all.

The situation came to a head in the summer of 1559. Hesshus was out of town. And while Hesshus was away, the faculty of the college awarded a theology degree to Klebitz, knowing full well that had Pastor Hesshus been around, he would have snapped the reins on that idea before the idea was out of the starting block. When Hesshus got back to town, he was livid. He preached a scathing sermon, calling Assistant Pastor Klebitz "a Zwinglian devil," and promising that this "hellish, devilish, cursed, cruel, and terrible thing" the faculty had done would be punished in frightening fashion unless the degree was revoked and Klebitz thrown not only out of the church, but out of the province altogether. The faculty ignored Pastor Hesshus.

And the following Sunday, people came to church expecting some drama, and they were not disappointed. Assistant Pastor Klebitz stood at the communion table, ready to assist as usual. But when he lifted the cup of wine, Pastor Hesshus wrenched it from his hand. The shocked congregation stared open-mouthed as its pastors went at each other like Ali and Frazier, only in clerical robes, right there in the middle of the chancel of the church.

It wasn't long before Frederick, the Elector of the Palatinate, something like the governor of the province, got wind of what had happened. Frederick had started out life as a Roman Catholic, but he married a Protestant, the Lutheran Princess Maria of Brandenburg who had made him promise to read the Bible daily. He had complied, spending many hours in study and prayer. He became more Protestant than Maria....he became a Calvinist!

It fell to him to do something about all the goings-on in the Holy Ghost Church between Hesshus and Klebitz. He sent both men packing, and then he closeted himself in his rooms to study the Bible, hoping to see for himself God's answers to the questions that were tearing the province apart.

The story gets even more complicated from there, but, to put it in a nutshell, Frederick invited a young theologian Zacharias Ursinus who was joined by a preacher Caspar Olevianus. Frederick set the two of them to work writing a new catechism which Frederick hoped would serve to unite his province, instruct young people in the Protestant expression of faith, and help people live faithfully in their personal lives.

But the drama wasn't over. The emperor was Maximilian II, a Roman Catholic. His rule depended on firm control over the Protestant princes and provinces. He ordered Frederick to come to Augsburg to be put on trial.

No one had much hope that Frederick would get out of this alive. On May 14, 1566, the charges were read, accusing Frederick of heresy and requiring him to turn from his Reformed faith upon penalty of banishment. As it turned out, Frederick drawing strength from the affirmation, "My only comfort in

life and in death is that I belong, body and soul, in life and in death, not to myself but to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ," convinced his Lutheran detractors and Maximilian himself not to banish or kill him. He was acquitted of all charges, and Maximilian even nicknamed him "Frederick the Pious." (1)

The story of how the Heidelberg Catechism came to be is a story of messy politics.

And so is the story of the people of Israel, of Samuel, of Saul, of Jesse, of Eliab and Abinadab and Shammah, and the four other sons, and David. It is a story that is framed by the very human emotion of fear and grief: Samuel both grieves for and is afraid of Saul. The elders of Bethlehem are afraid of Samuel. There is a lot of messy, emotional, highly political energy electrifying the atmosphere.

Were we in the midst of the drama in Bethlehem in that ancient day several thousand years ago, were we in the midst of the drama being played out in a clerical wrestling match in the chancel of the Holy Ghost Church, it may have been difficult, if not impossible, to detect the presence and purpose of God in the events as they were occurring.

But the storytellers of the Bible and our faith tradition mean for us to trust that whether or not we detect the presence and power of God in any given moment, God is working God's purposes out, and it often happens behind the scenes.

To be sure, the distinction between good and bad is not as easily distinguishable as we sometimes wish that it were. Saul the "bad" king is not all bad, and David the "good" king is not all good.(2) (Read I and II Samuel in its entirety to get a bigger picture.) Heshus was a mixture of good and bad, and so was Klebitz, and so was Ursinus and Olevianus and Frederick and Maximilian. And so is every President and every politician and every preacher that the world has ever known. And so am I, and so are you.

In every place and in every time, life is mixture of good and bad. However, in the midst of this messy mixture that we call life, we are invited to trust that somehow, in some way, God is present and God's purposes are being worked out.

We have a theological word for this. The word is *providence*. And I think about it nearly every time that I am in the Congregation House and I look at the piece that hangs on the wall to your right when you enter the first door of Room A. Lots of hands constructed the piece several years ago. We tied colorful strips of fabric onto a wire frame. We just took the color of fabric that we were told to take. We tied it on. And, frankly, it looked like a mess with all those ragged ends of fabric sticking up here and there. There did not appear to be any discernible pattern whatsoever. But then the last piece of fabric was tied, and we turned it over. And there it was: a beautiful work of art.

Such is God's providence. From our miniscule, human perspective, life can look like a mess. But from the other side, God is using the mess to create something beautiful.

1. Jack Rogers, *Presbyterian Creeds: A Guide to The Book of Confessions*, (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985), 102-107.
2. Eugene H. Peterson, *First and Second Samuel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999), 91-94.