
“God and Country?”

A SERMON on 2nd Samuel 5:1-5, 9-10 for the 14th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B
Preached 4 July 2021 by the Rev. Matthew Emery, Lead Minister
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As I drove home one evening a little over a week ago, on the CBC Radio 1 news program to which I was listening a field reporter was getting comments from some hockey fans out on the street, in preparation for this week’s Stanley Cup Finals. The thing was, though, this reporter was not out on the avenues of *La Ville de Montréal*, talking to lifelong fans of *Les Canadiens*. The reporter was up the river and around the lake in the GTA, the 416, the big T.O.: Toronto. The question on the reporter’s mind was, in the spirit of national unity, whether Torontonians were going to put rivalries aside and cheer for the Habs¹. After all, the Montreal Canadiens were the only Canadian team remaining in the playoffs, the only team that this year could finally bring the Stanley Cup back home to Canada after its 27-year sojourn in a foreign land.

Well, perhaps you can imagine about how well *that* went over with some of them. I mean, there *were* actually a few of the people this reporter spoke with who were going to root for Montreal, the team now representing the whole country. But rivalries run deep, don’t they? Indeed, it was well captured when the reporter told one 30-something guy that some other people had said that they would cheer on Montreal, for the sake of Canada, and his quick reply was, “well, they’re not *real* Leafs² fans!”

It’s a real dilemma, isn’t it? Country or team? Put aside rivalries for the sake of national unity, or stay true to your truest loyalties and your deepest disdain for those “other” guys?

Of course, such things are fun to joke around about when we’re talking about hockey or some other team sport or leisure-time pursuit. It is, after all, just a game, right? And most of the time, most of us recognize that—at least I hope so! The question of what you give your truest loyalties and deepest allegiances to, though... this question is no mere game.

Today’s scripture passage from 2nd Samuel continues moving us forward in the story of the people of Israel and their most-celebrated king, King David. Those of us who were in worship a few weeks ago perhaps remember that the prophet Samuel warned the people that they shouldn’t establish a king over them—that God, and God alone, was to be their king and that a having a human king would turn out badly. And, of course, that nevertheless the people demanded a king anyway. Israel’s first king, Saul, was crowned, and indeed, things with Saul weren’t so wonderful. Soon enough, David was anointed by Samuel as God’s choice to be the new king instead of Saul, but Saul wasn’t gone yet. We even saw David spending time assisting Saul, like at that time that David killed the Philistine giant, Goliath, armed only with his slingshot and 5 river stones. Alas, soon enough there is conflict and jealousy between Saul and David, too, with Saul coming rather

¹ The Montreal Canadiens (*Les Canadiens de Montréal*) are colloquially known as “The Habs,” from *les habitants*, a term used for French settlers and inhabitants of French origin who farmed the land along the St. Lawrence River valley in the colonial New France era of the 17th and 18th centuries. The Canadiens hockey team was originally founded to be the team of the francophone community in Montreal, composed of francophone players, and under francophone ownership as soon as possible (in contrast to other teams, who represented the anglophone community)—hence the connection with *les habitants*. As an aside, the ‘H’ figure in the middle of the team’s logo is often assumed to stand for ‘Habs’ or ‘habitants’, but purportedly stands for “hockey”.

² The Toronto Maple Leafs.

close to having David killed on multiple occasions. Eventually, though, it is Saul that got killed, as part of a military battle, opening the way for David to finally become the king.

The scene we heard this morning recalls the point at which David finally gets recognized as king over all of Israel—not simply the king-in-waiting, as he was while Saul was still around, and not only king over Judah, his home tribe. King over all Israel.

The elders of Israel who welcomed and anointed David as king over all Israel, they affirm that God had been calling forth David to be “shepherd” and “ruler”. And at the end of our passage today, we hear from the narrator that “David became greater and greater, for the Lord, the God of hosts, was with him.”

Here’s the thing though... by a complete coincidence of the way our schedule of scripture readings happens to intersect with our ordinary civil calendar this year, we hear this passage on the same weekend that here on this continent, both of our great North American nation-states are observing their civic holidays that commemorate their respective founding—this past Thursday, of course, for us here in Canada, and today for our neighbours south of the border. And this confluence, of observing the founding of countries and remembering the inauguration of David’s kingly reign, it has me wondering about allegiances.

You see, all is well and good here at this point, where it seems that indeed David is following in the ways of God, filled with God’s anointing and benefitting from the closeness of God’s presence with him. And yet, somehow, that all seems easier to maintain when David as God’s chosen shepherd servant is *not* also David the King of the country. In other words, the truth seems to be that it’s not very long after David fully becomes king that David’s own paths begin to stumble.

It’s not just David, though. Time and time again throughout human history, when the religious leaders and the civic leaders end up being too close and comfortable of bedfellows, the faithfulness of the faith seems to falter. When push comes to shove between God and country, it’s typically the latter that wins out most of the time. And, in fact, the latter will win out so strongly that it will convince people that the witness of the former is on its side.

Not quite four years ago, in the autumn of 2017, I spent a little over 7 weeks in Europe during a sabbatical, with a lot of my travel destinations themed around the 500th anniversary of the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. At various points, I was walking the Royal Mile in Edinburgh in the footsteps of John Knox, the early Scottish Presbyterian reformer; popping about in and around Cambridge, where English Puritans, of both Presbyterian and Congregationalist varieties, had shown strength; climbing the hill into the Old City section of Geneva, Switzerland, from which John Calvin’s witness sounded forth; and, of course, making my way around the various towns of central and eastern Germany where that pesky German monk, good ol’ Martin Luther, went about his work of rediscovering the gospel and trying to reform the church. Along the way, I happened to stop by the city of Berlin for a few days, for no particular reason other than that I had never been there before. Even though Berlin didn’t have any particularly strong association with Reformation history, as it turns out, it was there that I accidentally stumbled across one of the most impactful stops of my whole trip.

In central Berlin, only a couple of blocks from the former site of the infamous “Checkpoint Charlie,” there is a museum called the “Topography of Terror.” Located on the site of the former

Gestapo and SS headquarters, the Topography of Terror is a centre documenting the horrors of the Nazi regime through a variety of permanent and special exhibitions. Only after I'd arrived in Berlin did I see an advertisement of the special exhibit for those summer and fall months, entitled "*Luther's words are everywhere ...*" – *Martin Luther in Nazi Germany*. The exhibit chronicled the way in which the Nazi regime co-opted the legacy of Luther in support of their aims to amass power and implement genocide. Some of this was based on Luther's own words and deeds—it is true; Luther, especially in his later years, did say reprehensible things about Jews, and to deny or minimize that fact is simply dishonest. Much of the Nazi co-option, though, came simply from a quest for an emblem of the fierce German strongman, a figurehead that could rally popular passions, and Luther fit the bill well.

The photographs were gut-wrenching: A Protestant clergyman, dressed in a black preacher's gown robe much like the one I wore each Sunday at my previous church, flanked by a Nazi SA regiment, arm raised in the "heil Hitler" salute. A banner hanging across the stage at a rally, flanked by Nazi flags, proclaiming "for the completion of the German Reformation in the spirit of Martin Luther!" A poster, advertising observances of Luther's 450th birthday, with a swastika superimposed on the centre of the Christian cross.

Now, some of us who have studied—or even briefly dabbled in—subjects like theology and church history have probably heard of someone like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German Protestant pastor from this era who became famous for his work in the resistance efforts against Hitler and the Nazi regime. And it can be easy to hear about Bonhoeffer and others and to take pride in voices from the Christian church being on the right side of history and ethics. But, alas, the Confessing Church was merely a minority of the overall German Protestant establishment. In the fateful church elections of 1933, the pro-Nazi "German Christians" won some two-thirds to three-quarters of the vote. As a whole, the German Protestant Church was *not* on the right side of history or ethics in that era.

Now, of course, most of us think that Nazism and the atrocities of the Holocaust are things that wouldn't happen here. And when it comes to something on that scale, or with those particulars, we're probably right. But that doesn't mean we aren't immune from having the church's witness diminished and the church's moral footing compromised from too comfortable and uncritical a relationship with our civic society. Trying to hold together allegiances to God *and* country is no easy thing, no matter what our oaths and pledges may say—especially for any of us who typically do relatively well by the ways of our world.

In a poem-prayer titled "The Noise of Politics," the biblical scholar, pastor, and theologian Walter Brueggemann writes:

We watch as the jets fly in
with the power people and
the money people,
the suits, the budgets, the billions.

We wonder about monetary policy
because we are among the haves,
and about generosity

because we care about the have-nots.

By slower modes we notice
Lazarus and the poor arriving from Africa,
and the beggars from Central Europe, and
the throng of environmentalists
with their vision of butterflies and oil
of flowers and tanks
of growing things and killing fields.

We wonder about peace and war,
about ecology and development,
about hope and entitlement.

We listen beyond jeering protesters and
soaring jets and
faintly we hear the mumbling of the crucified one,
something about
feeding the hungry
and giving drink to the thirsty,
about clothing the naked,
and noticing the prisoners,
more about the least and about holiness among them.

We are moved by the mumbles of the gospel,
even while we are tenured in our privilege.

We are half ready to join the choir of hope,
half afraid things might change,
and in a third half of our faith turning to you,
and your outpouring love
that works justice and
that binds us each and all to one another.

So we pray amidst jeering protesters
and soaring jets.
Come by here and make new,
even at some risk to our entitlements.³

Indeed, may it be so. Amen.

³ Walter Brueggemann, *Prayers for a Privileged People* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2008), 21-22.