

“From Misfits to Messengers”

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I Samuel 22:1-2

David left there and escaped to the cave of Adullam; when his brothers and all his father's house heard of it, they went down there to him. Everyone who was in distress, and everyone who was in debt, and everyone who was discontented gathered to him; and he became captain over them. Those who were with him numbered about four hundred.

Psalm 142 Prayer for Deliverance from Persecutors

A MASKIL OF DAVID. WHEN HE WAS IN THE CAVE. A PRAYER.

With my voice I cry to the LORD; with my voice I make supplication to the LORD. I pour out my complaint before him; I tell my trouble before him.

When my spirit is faint, you know my way. In the path where I walk they have hidden a trap for me. Look on my right hand and see—there is no one who takes notice of me; no refuge remains to me; no one cares for me. I cry to you, O LORD; I say, “You are my refuge, my portion in the land of the living.”

Give heed to my cry, for I am brought very low. Save me from my persecutors, for they are too strong for me. Bring me out of prison, so that I may give thanks to your name. The righteous will surround me, for you will deal bountifully with me.

The future king David is sheltering in a cave called Adullam. Those of you worshiping from the Brockville area, you might picture the middle of the train tunnel — only there's no Tragically Hip music playing and no fancy lights except for the light at the end of the tunnel. Even if you've never spent quality time in a cave; that tunnel sure gives us a good idea of what it could be like. It's dark, it's damp, it's cool. The walls have those alien-looking stalactites hanging down. At least I think stalactites hang down ... I can never remember the difference between the mites and the tites... one hangs down in a cave and the other grows up from the minerals deposits in a cave. Caves are pretty cool places to visit. They are not so great to stay in, unless you have no choice. Unless you have no place to go and especially unless you need to hide, because then a cave becomes a shelter.

As David sat at the back of the cave, he must have wondered how he got there. He wasn't supposed to be there, he was supposed to be at dinner — sitting at the king's royal table, a roaring fire in the fireplace nearby, music playing and a table filled with roast lamb, fresh barley bread and date cakes and figs. How did he go from the table to the tunnel?

He had won King Saul's approval by killing the giant Goliath, but now Saul was becoming seriously paranoid that David was trying to take the crown from him, and so he vows to kill him.

So here he was. Sitting in a cave, feeling sorry for himself. "*Look on my right hand and see—there is no one who takes notice of me; no refuge remains to me; no one cares for me.*"

This is what he cries out to the Lord. Sometimes this is our cry. Sometimes we find ourselves in dark and difficult places.

Actually, I like that David has a pity party in the cave. For one, it reminds me that this greatest king was truly human. But what I like most of all is that David invites God to his pity party. He cries out to God. Some people think you have to be in a good space to approach God. But the Psalms, including the one (Psalm 142) we read, show us that it is okay and even good to bring God into our most painful, stressful, angry or pity-party places of our lives.

Some of you have been in really dark places and some of you are there right now. I want you to know that God sees you. He sees you in that cave of pain and struggle. He sees your suffering. You are not alone.

And God hears David's cry. God answers his cry for help. Glory be! God sends David help. Listen to what the scripture says: *Everyone who was in distress, and everyone who was in debt, and everyone who was discontented gathered to him.*"

Wait, what?? Great! Just what he needed! A bunch of broke, miserable losers! And not a couple of broke, miserable failures, but 400 of them! Like, thanks God! Thanks for that answer to prayer! I mean, with a God like you, who needs a devil!

David had big problems: his life was in serious danger and then there was this whole thing about becoming a king. The prophet Samuel seemed to think God wanted him to be king. Even if there was a way to becoming king, did he want it? Israel at that time was a very tribal and divided nation and the problems facing them were never ending —like the threat of the Philistines. David had serious personal problems and wider problems. He prayed and what was God's answer? A bunch of rejected and dejected men!

There are a lot of challenging situations out there for us here today. Tomorrow is Election Day in municipalities in Ontario. Just over a week ago we had those running for councillor here in the church for an all-candidates meeting so we could get to know who we were voting for. Many of the issues in the community were raised. Homelessness and the housing crisis came up again and again. These are real issues. They are big issues and

the answers are not easy. I applaud anyone who wants to run for public office today, because the challenges are getting bigger and the resources to solve these problems seem to be getting smaller and the fuses on all sides are getting shorter and shorter. And of course, these are just local issues — the problems of the world add a whole other layer and weight.

But why bother reminding you about these issues? It's not like we as church can do much about it. After all, we can barely get people to serve on our own committees.

The denomination, the mainline church has been in a **slow decline** for the last 60 years; but now with the **pandemic**, it's like it went from a slow rising tide to a **flood** that has swept through. Two and a half years of Covid and here we are in another wave. The pandemic has aged us all and wearied us all. It's not been an easy time. Churches all around are closing. I was talking to another minister, a friend who is a pretty bright guy ... and he figures that 50% of United Churches will close within the next 3 years.

So when I think of big problems in our community and the world and I hear people suggest the church should do something about it, I feel like saying: "We have enough of our own problems, thank you very much. Here we are up against the problems of the community, let alone the problems of the world."

I can't help but wonder if that's how David felt when people started joining him. He had enough problems of his own without worrying about all their problems, and they seemed to come with a bucket load of problems. What does David have to offer them? Just before this passage, as David is on the run, he goes to a temple and begs for sanctified bread to eat and begs for a weapon to defend himself. The priest takes pity and gives him the consecrated bread and gives him Goliath's sword —the sword of the giant he had slain. It's a pretty cool sword, but all he's got is one, and that stale bread is now gone. What's he going to do with all these men and their problems?

But instead of shooing them away or running away from them he gathered them and became their captain. Funny thing.

That's the thing, I don't know if David fully understood God's plan or God's very strange ways, but he trusted God and so continued to put one foot in front of the other. Like the apostle Paul, about a thousand years later, David seemed to understand that in God's hands weakness can be transformed and what is small can make big differences. Paul said in 2 Corinthians 12:10 *"It is when I am weak that I am strong"*. And so David could say and believe: *"I cry to you, O Lord; I say, "you are my refuge, my portion in the land of the living."*

It is a mystery why God seems to choose the weak, the flawed, the small, the broken to be a house for God's powerful, healing love. When King Saul failed to do God's will, God looked for another who would be king. God chose Jesse's youngest son, the son no one even thought to even call when Samuel asked Jesse to bring him his sons. Even Samuel assumed it would be the oldest or the strongest who would be chosen. God chose the youngest.

God came to earth and became human but he didn't come strong or wealthy, he came as an ordinary Jewish man, in an occupied territory. The church didn't start as a powerful institution, but as a small group of people — who didn't even always get along with one another.

God chose weakness.

Alcoholics Anonymous understands the power of weak. Bill Wilson the founder realized that the place of powerlessness is the place where life and true power begins — Step 1. Admitted we were powerless over our addiction and that our lives had become unmanageable. Bill Wilson and the other writers of the Twelve Steps understood that it is in that place of powerlessness, where your ego has given up fighting, there, there is room for God, room for healing, room for new life!

Friends, it's not looking good for the church. Many churches are in palliative care, our Wall Street United is walking with a decent limp. We have to take stock of where we are and what lies ahead in the future. We have a choice as we look at a bleak situation. We can batten down the hatches and go into full-blown survival mode, or worse we can give up, or we can pray and follow no matter where God leads us. And God always leads out. Just look up at our banners behind me: "De Profundis, Extra Muros": "Out of the Depths, Beyond the Walls." This means we have to receive God's answer to prayer and trust God. Trust that God does amazing things through small, weak, broken people and churches.

What can you do? I invite you to pray during this critical time. I invite you to pray for God's direction for this church, for churches across this country. Because without the Holy Spirit, without God's mission and purpose we are nothing. Pray about what you can do with all your limitations to serve God's purpose in the church and beyond. And then I invite you to be open for God's answer to prayer, be open to change. The church can't go back to what it used to be in the 1960's but that's okay because there is a future. God still has work for us to do. God doesn't care about the limp. "*My grace is sufficient for you*" says the Lord, "*for my power is made perfect in weakness.*"

Last Sunday we had a wonderful Celebrate Life evening service. If you've never attended, I encourage you to check it out in person or online through Facebook on the Celebrate Life Service FB group. Last week Jason Holmes, who is a key leader of CL, told us a story of a friend of his who recently got out of prison. The guy had served time in prison in Kingston. When he was released and heading back to Brockville, the team asked him to check in with a supportive program for ex-convicts and one other program. Do you know what that program was? Celebrate Life! I have no idea how a prison in Kingston has any idea about our evening service that is geared to people with hurts, habits and hang-ups (and that's all us — we are all broken!) but they do, and they're sending people to us. Now you may not see that as a blessing. But I do!

“Everyone who was in distress, and everyone who was in debt, and everyone who was discontented gathered to him; ...”

Why did they gather to David? They saw in him what he barely could see in himself. They saw a king! They saw hope for a better future and a brighter tomorrow.

“Everyone who was in distress, and everyone who was in debt, and everyone who was discontented gathered to him; **and he became captain over them.**”

David took that motley, miserable group of people and he created an army that ended up bringing a nation together.

Why would anyone be drawn to what is going on here at this church? It's not for the perfect temperature settings, it's not for the coffee that we're not even serving anymore. It's for one reason alone: they see another king. A descendant of David, 1000 years later, Jesus went to and through a cross on his way to sitting at the right hand of the throne of God.

Through all of the brokenness and imperfections they see the light — not the light at the end of the tunnel, not the light of a train about to run over them — but the light of the king of glory shining through and offering healing and hope for a brighter future.

If we lean into that light, if we allow that light to spill out into the community, what love, what blessing, what a city on a hill we will be! Let us be that little light. Thanks be to God! Amen

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