

Today's readings show us two heroes of the Bible: David, and Peter. David, the slayer of Goliath, perhaps greatest King in the Bible, who united the nation of Israel, who wrote the Psalms, a hero in both Judaism and Christianity, King David, direct ancestor of Jesus of Nazareth. And Simon Peter, leader of the apostles of Jesus Christ, and the "rock" on which the Christian church is founded, who proclaimed Jesus as the Messiah, to which Jesus replied "Blessed are you Simon, son of Jonah"

We might be able to agree that (together) these two figures are central in the history of Christianity, and they are rightly thought of as heroes of the faith. David paved the human path that led to Jesus' birth, and Peter helped to pave the path that led to the Christian church. In a world in search of heroes, here are two spotless role models. Well.... maybe not spotless. I mean, if we were to look very closely, there are some slight blemishes on their records. If we wanted to be really picky, there was that little incident in David's life with a woman named Bathsheba..

The story of David and Bathsheba is one of those stories which good religious folk don't like to talk about, but the story is right there in the book 2 Samuel, chapter 11. A quick recap for those who may have forgotten the story, or may not have ever heard it: David woke up, looked out his window, and saw Bathsheba taking a bath. He sent for her and (Quote) "he lay with her," and (as luck would have it) she became pregnant. So David, in an attempt to cover his tracks, tries to bring home her husband (Uriah the Hittite) from the battlefield, hoping that then Uriah would think the baby was his own. Uriah the Hittite refused, so David sent him back to the battlefield with a letter to his Commanding Officer, which said (and again I quote) "Set Uriah in the forefront of the hardest fighting, and then draw back from him, that he may be struck down, and die." (2 Samuel 11:15).

In verse 26 Bathsheba mourned for her husband.

In verse 27 David took her as his wife.

God sent the prophet Nathan to David, and Nathan confronted David with his sin. It is after this that David wrote Psalm 51:

"For I know my transgressions and my sin is ever before me, Against you, you alone, have I sinned" (v 3-4).

Well, I guess if we look at that, the maybe David isn't the spotless example of Christian living. Well, at least we still have Peter, the rock on which the church was founded. Surely Jesus would choose a solid moral leader on which to build his church. Someone with an impeccable record, faithful through good times and bad. And Peter fits that description... not at all. There was that one time that he denied he knew Jesus. And then there was another time where he, well, denied that he knew Jesus. And if I remember correctly, I think there might have been a third time that Peter denied Jesus.

Remember where Peter was when he denied Jesus? John's Gospel paints the scene particularly well. In chapter 18 begins with the arrest of Jesus. A brief recap of the scene:

- 1) Simon Peter cut off an ear of one of the people who came to arrest Jesus.
- 2) Jesus told Peter to put his sword away (Luke's gospel records that Jesus then healed the severed ear).
- 3) Jesus before the high priest.

4) Peter denies Jesus while warming himself at a fire surrounded by those who would execute Jesus the next day.

5) Jesus is questioned by the high priest.

6) Peter, still warming himself by the fire, denies that he knows Jesus two more times.

7) Jesus is sent before Pilate.

Look at the structure of that chapter: if the scene was in a movie it would flash back and forth between the two, showing the events taking place simultaneously:

Jesus, on trial for his life; Peter, outside protecting himself while warming himself over a fire.

You know, for a sermon about hope, this seems to be centering a lot on failure. Failure to live up to God's expectations, failure to live up to society's expectations, failure to live up to our own expectations.... Do you think that either David or Peter wanted to make these mistakes? Of course not. I don't really think that David or Peter planned for what happened. Their good intentions weren't enough, because they didn't carry through. When the chips were down, when the time of trial came, they failed.

Where's the hope in that? The hope is in this: their failure is not the end of the story. Their stories do not end with them flat on their face. Not at all. Rather, the story continues with God's action. In David's case, God sent someone to talk with David, and get him to face what he had done. Listen again to David's words. He asks for seven things:

1) "Hide your face from my sins" David asks God not to look at what he has done wrong in the past.

2) "blot out all my iniquity." David asks God to remove what is sinful from him.

3) "Create in me a clean heart," David asks that he be given a clean slate, a chance to start anew.

4) "put a new and right spirit within me." David wants God to make him new and improved, as it were.

Number 5) and number 6) go together: "Do not cast me from your presence and do not take your holy spirit from me." David realizes that he hasn't got a chance without God and the Holy Spirit.

7) "Restore to me the joy of your salvation," Could we read this as "Lord, make me hope-filled"? God, remind me of what it was that first made me respond to your call. Give that back to me, please God, I miss that. I don't know when it was that I lost it, maybe it wasn't one specific day or time, but suddenly one day it just wasn't there anymore.

David closes his list of request by repeating his 4th request "sustain in me a willing spirit." God, give me the strength to try again. Help me maintain my willpower when times go bad. It probably isn't surprising that David would repeat this request, he recognizes his need for God's help.

Let's not forget Peter.... How must he have felt after he heard the rooster crow? Matthew, Mark, and Luke all record that Peter cried when he realized that Jesus' words had come true. Can you imagine the guilt and the pain that Peter must have felt? The Bible doesn't record anything of what Peter said. But, remember, the story doesn't end with Peter's failure. After the denial there's the condemnation, after the condemnation there's the cross, and after the cross, the burial. Where is the hope in that? The hope is right there, behind me. That cross hangs on the wall, and there's the hope. The cross is empty. And three days later, so is the tomb. The burial tomb is empty, and the hope is with us that we know that Jesus was not overcome by the power of death, Jesus was not overcome by the power of sin. Jesus ended that story by leaving the tomb. And where did he go? Back to the apostles. Back to that big group of failures who had run away, scared and confused. He went back to them to let them know that he was continuing the story.

Jesus went back to Peter, the biggest failure of the bunch and do you remember what he said? In John 21 Jesus and Peter sit down and have a little talk. Jesus didn't say "I told you so!" He didn't make Peter grovel for forgiveness. He simply asked Peter one question: "Do you love me?" Jesus repeats the question 3 times --- the same number of times that Peter had denied Jesus. Jesus knew the pain that Peter felt. Jesus knew the pain that David felt too. God knows the pain that you and I are feeling. There's never a shortage of guilt, it seems. There's never a shortage of mistakes. People say that we learn more from our mistakes than from our triumphs. If that's the case then I should be a four star genius. But I'm not. But there is one thing that I have learned, and that is this: the story's not over 'til the savior comes again. David pleaded with God to help him. Peter was unable to speak any words, but Jesus knew his pain anyway. I've been there. Perhaps you have been too. I'm sure that David and Peter both promised themselves and God that they would never waver again. I'm made that promise before. Perhaps you have too. Peter and David both fell short even after these painful lessons. I've fallen short too. But that's still not the end of the story.... The story continues, and that is the hope for all times. No matter what has gone before, the story doesn't end with our failures.

I implied rather heavily that Peter and David are not the great moral leaders that we might think they are at first glance. But what can we learn from them? Are they nothing more than giant failures? No, not at all. I believe that they are much more. They are teachers for us. We can learn from David's earnest appeal to God for help after his failure. The seven points I mentioned before boil down to just two: asking for forgiveness, and asking for another chance. We can learn from Peter's failures that God will not abandon us no matter how often we abandon God and come crawling back, humbled and humiliated. We can hope in that God did not give up on them: David did not lose his kingship, and Peter was not replaced as the rock-foundation of the church. God has a plan for us too, and our failures will not forfeit our relationship with God. If we can learn this from David and Peter, we will see that they are role models, not of perfection, but of the failures that plague us all, and which remind us that we all need forgiveness. In Jesus Christ we are given the hope that we are forgiven.

Finally, we should remember Jesus' words to Peter, and see how they can apply to us as well. Jesus asked Peter: "Do you love me?" Not "Why did you deny me even after I warned you..." Not "Ok you have reached your quota of mistakes and now I expect you to be perfect" and not "This is your last chance." Rather, "Do you love me?" Being perfect isn't what the story is about. From Genesis onward we have been failing God, but God still uses plain old men and women to go out into the world. Jesus isn't interested in our guilt. He did not come to earth to yell at us for failing. Jesus came to offer us forgiveness, and to ask us one very important question "Do you love me?" Because if you do, then there are a million things left to do: people who need to hear the good news, people who need comforting, people who need guidance, people who just need friends in good times and in bad. There are so many out there who need to hear about the God who loved the world that He gave His only son.... Jesus once told his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few." [Luke 10:2] The same is true today. God has a Help Wanted sign out for every single one of us today:

Help Wanted. No experience or references necessary.

On-the-job training available.

Job includes long hours and little money, but the retirement plan is out of this world.

Inquire above.