

“The End of the Story”
1 Kings 2:1-12
10th Sunday after Pentecost

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Westminster, Greenville
Ben Dorr

A few years ago, David Brooks wrote a piece in *The New York Times* about a young woman named Clemantine.

Clemantine is a survivor of the genocide in Rwanda from 25 years ago. She was 6 when she fled her homeland with her older sister, leaving her parents and spending her childhood in refugee camps across 8 different African nations.

She came to the United States as a refugee in 2000 with her sister. A few years later, Clemantine was one of 50 winners of Oprah Winfrey’s high school essay contest. In 2006, Oprah had a show celebrating the winners. She asked Clemantine and her sister when they had last seen their parents.

It was 12 years.

Then Oprah says, “Your family is here!”—
and to Clemantine’s astonishment,
her parents walk on stage, with two other siblings.

Clemantine immediately runs into their arms, overwhelmed with elation.

Brooks writes:

“Clematine’s story, as I knew it then, ha[d] a comforting arc: separation, perseverance, reunion, and joy. It’s the kind of clean, inspiring story that many of us tell, in less dramatic form, about our own lives...”

But that arc was not the whole story.

As Brooks explains, Clemantine “never really reconciled with her family...[they] flew back home to Africa the following Monday.”

And Clemantine’s sister married a refugee worker, but things didn’t turn out all roses there either.

Clemantine herself had moments of struggle along the way as she tried to reconcile her old life with her new one.

Brooks goes on:

“We work hard to cram our lives into legible narratives. But we live in the fog of reality.”

He says that he admires Clemantine for many things, including “the maturity to accept unanswerable ambiguity...the unwillingness to settle for the simple, fake story; and the capacity to look at life in all its ugly complexity.”¹

What does that David Brooks column have to do with King David?

I think the writer of King David’s narrative knows something about the “ugly complexity” of life. After all, King David’s life doesn’t take the shape of a beautiful arc, and it sure doesn’t end with a clean, inspirational story.

As one commentator puts it, David “died in the middle of a family squabble....Instead of...his children and wives gathered around him expressing love and gratitude, he was embroiled in a mare’s nest of intrigue and deceit.”²

And that’s just chapter 1 of 1st Kings...

In our 12 verses for today, David behaves like a vengeful mafia boss. He says to his son Solomon, who will succeed him on the throne:

“...you know what Joab...did to me, how he dealt with the two commanders of the armies of Israel...whom he murdered....Act therefore according to your wisdom, but do not let his gray head go down to Sheol in peace.”

And then David says:

“There is also with you Shimei son of Gera...who cursed me with a terrible curse....you must bring his gray head down with blood to Sheol.”

¹ David Brooks, “The Courage of Small Things,” *The New York Times*, July 7, 2015.

² Eugene H. Peterson, *Leap Over a Wall: Earthy Spirituality for Everyday Christians*, New York: HarperCollins, 1997.

The end of the David story is THIS?

A bloodthirsty David?

A bitter, frail, vindictive old man...this is the same David who gets REVERED in the New Testament so that Jesus is referred to as Son of David?

What are we to make of this ending to the David story?

Should we be horrified by it?

Should we just ignore it?

As unpleasant as it is, there's something reassuring about it to me.

Not that I LIKE what David decided to do.

But I do like that the writer of this story REFUSED to gloss over David's difficulties at the end of his life.

Because even if we don't go around behaving like a mafia boss, there's something in David that I recognize.

A difficulty that David had that I sometimes have as well:
LETTING GO.

David, at the end of his life, was having trouble letting go.

Letting go of his grudges.

Letting go of being in control.

Letting go of the life that God had given him.

Have you ever had trouble letting go of something?

I recall when I was 12 years old, and I went water skiing for the first time.

Out on a lake with my cousins, my uncle was driving the boat, another uncle giving directions to all us cousins in the boat.

They told me how to get up in the water, crouching position, let the boat pull you up—but if you fall, they said, just stick your hand up so we can see it and release the rope.

So of course, first time trying to get up, I didn't make it anywhere and fell right away. Next time, I start to get up...and it looks like I'm going to be up, boat is starting to pull me...and then I lost my balance and fell again. Fell headfirst into the water, but I was remembering my uncle's instructions: if you fall, stick your hand up above the water.

So I stick my arm out of the water, but the boat is still going.

And I'm face down in the water with my hand up in the air, waving my hand above the water, being pulled by the boat, water is going up my nose and in my mouth...

Why aren't they slowing down?

Finally, after it felt like I had swallowed half the lake, I got my head up, spitting, sputtering...the boat stopped and my uncle is standing on the side of the motorboat, with a big grin: "Ben, you've got to let go of the rope!"

That would've done the trick, wouldn't it?

All I had to do was let go.

But I forgot to let go.

In my 12-year-old brain, my instinct was to hang on...

And 35 years later, I still find myself, in different ways, HANGING ON...

Hanging on to the illusion that one's body can do the things it used to do 20 years ago without getting hurt...just to take a purely hypothetical example.

Hanging on to the fantasy that if I work hard and play by God's rules, God owes me good things.

Hanging on to the belief that faith doesn't need to cost me much...

Hanging on to the idols that give me comfort every day:

That my time is my own.

That I'm in control of my life.

That being successful is the same thing as being faithful.

Is there anything in your life you like hanging onto?

It doesn't have to be something BAD.
It can be something GOOD.

John Claypool was a pastor of another generation.
And when he was a boy, growing up, WWII broke out.

He writes:

“When WWII started, my family did not have a washing machine. With gas rationed and the laundry several miles away, keeping our clothes clean became an intensely practical problem.

“One of my father's younger business associates was drafted and his wife prepared to go with him, and we offered to let them store their furniture in our basement. Quite unexpectedly, they suggested that we use their washing machine while they were gone.

“Since I used to help with the washing, across the years I developed quite an affectionate relation for that old green Bendix. But eventually the war ended, and our friends returned, and in the meantime I had forgotten how the machine had come to be in our basement in the first place. When they came and took it, I was terribly upset and I said so quite openly.

“But my mother, being the wise woman she is, sat me down and put things in perspective. She said, ‘Wait a minute, son. You must remember, that machine never belonged to us in the first place. That we ever got to use it at all was a gift. So, instead of being mad at its being taken away, let's use this occasion to be grateful that we ever had it at all.’”³

It is good advice...but that doesn't make letting go any easier.

³ From John Claypool's sermon, "Life Is Gift," in his book *Tracks of a Fellow Struggler: Living and Growing through Grief*, Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1974.

I recall the woman who came to my office years ago.
 She had an empty nest for the first time in 25 years.
 Last child off to college—she and her husband had the house all to
 themselves!

And she was beside herself.
 She missed the noise of her children.
 She missed staying up late with her children.
 She missed her kids' friends, who always came over with her children.

She knew that this time in her life would come.
 But she liked her old life.
 She wasn't ready for this time in her life to come.

How do we let go—this is the question that the end of David's life raises for
 us. How do we let go...not just of the ugly stuff...but how do we let go even of
 that which has been a gift to us?

I don't believe in formulas.
 I do believe in trust.
 And if there's anything that the big picture story of David says to me, it's
 this:

Trust the IMAGINATION OF GOD.

Samuel is looking for a king.
 Is it this son of Jesse? No...
 Is it this son of Jesse?
 Is it this one? This one?
 Got any more?
 Oh yes, the youngest is out with the sheep.
 The runt of the litter?
 Yes...

Oh, there's Goliath. Who can defeat him??!!
 David? With a sling and some stones?

Who would have pictured it?
God pictured it.

The fact is, our imaginations PALE in comparison to what God can imagine for us.

Do you remember, when Jesus was born, what KIND of Messiah the people were looking for?

A Messiah like David.
A return to the good ol' days of King David.
Was that the Messiah whom God sent?

No, no.
God looked at the world and said, you don't need another David.
You need Jesus.

And Jesus comes to us today.
And Jesus wants us to trust God's imagination today.
And we ask him where we're going.
And Jesus says—just trust me. Just trust me.

The pastor Michael Lindvall tells the story of an older couple he used to know. This was when he was a teenager, when he was living in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan.

The older couple were friends of Michael's parents.
Their names were John and May.
John was manager of a huge national wildlife refuge there, but before moving to northern Michigan, John was the manager of an even larger wildlife refuge in western Alaska, on the Bering Sea.

The place was remote.
So remote, in fact, that when John and May lived there in there in the 1950s, the supply ship—the one that brought the food—it came only once a year.

It was impossible to grow anything that far north.

So except for some local game and fish, everything that one needed to EAT during the course of a year came on that one boat!

Meat, canned goods, flour, sugar, vegetables, and eggs...one boat.

Once a year.

Planes would fly in with food, but it was very expensive to get your food by plane.

So if you couldn't afford the planes, you ordered a year's supply of food from the boat, froze what you could, and then you hoped the rest would keep.

This is what John and May did.

Now John and May liked eggs, they ordered a whole year's supply of eggs.

You can't really freeze eggs, but they kept if they were refrigerated well.

What happens to eggs that get refrigerated over the course of the year?

According to John and May, they would not go rotten.

They would simply change.

They would change SLOWLY.

VERY SLOWLY.

Each morning, John and May would enjoy their eggs, and they never noticed the change in the eggs, because it happened so gradually.

After 12 months, they would find themselves VERY CONTENTEDLY eating year-old eggs when the fresh ones would arrive from the boat.

Can you imagine the introduction of fresh eggs after eating year-old-eggs?

When John and May would take those new eggs, and scramble them up for breakfast...they didn't taste wonderful.

They tasted AWFUL!

May said they would spend the first few days eating the new eggs and spitting them back out, and then they'd start searching for the old ones. They were so accustomed to the taste of stale eggs, one day at a time, they liked them better than the fresh ones.⁴

⁴ This story originates with the Rev. Michael Lindvall, and was told by the Rev. Dr. Scott Black Johnston on February 3, 2013, in his sermon "Sipping Glory," at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, New York, New York.

Has this ever happened to you?

Have you ever gotten so used to the way things are, that you don't notice things are changing, until it's time for the change to occur?

And then you're scrambling around, trying to see if you've buried any old eggs in the fridge, because the change is just...so...new?

I hope the next time you're looking for those old eggs, you'll stop yourself. And remember that letting go isn't just a part of life that we have to get through.

Letting go works hand-in-hand with the imagination of God.

What is God imagining for you, at this time in your life?

There's only one way I know of to find out...

Amen.