A Precious Gift
Grace Chapel, 2 August 2026

This morning's scripture reading is one of my mother's favorite Bible stories. David was one of her favorite characters from the Bible. I understand that she wanted to name me David, but my father vetoed that because he had known a David that he didn't like. The Bible certainly describes for David an interesting life with lots of good and lots of, well, let's say "trouble." He's a character we can relate to, and try to be like David in his good moments and not like David in other ways. Yet, despite the being both good and bad, David loved God, was faithful, and was able to express and show God's love for him and others. This particular story shows David's caring and respect for his followers, and his humility before God. I find it a compelling example to live by.

The story of David takes up most of the two books of Samuel. He was chosen and anointed by Samuel to be the next King of Israel when he was just the seventh son of an obscure Bethlehemite named Jesse. At the time, Saul was the King anointed to lead the Israelites against the Philistines, and other enemies in the land of Canaan, the Promised Land. David showed up at a battle with the Philistines to bring supplies to his brothers who were in King Saul's army. While there, he decided to take on the Philistine champion, a giant named Goliath. He indeed was victorious, and killed the giant! We've all heard the story. He was later taken into Saul's court, and married Saul's daughter Michal.

But then, listen to this, from 1 Samuel 18:6-7

6 When the men were returning home after David had killed the Philistine, [that is, Goliath] the women came out from all the towns of Israel to meet King Saul with singing and dancing, with joyful songs and with timbrels and lyres. **7** As they danced, they sang: "Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands."

8 And Saul was very angry, and this saying displeased him; he said, "They have ascribed to David ten thousands, and to me they have ascribed thousands; and what more can he have but the kingdom?"

Saul saw David as competition, and tried to kill him. David fled. He gathered a band of men, brigands might be how you might described them. But he wasn't trusted, and ended up on the run from both Saul and the Philistines. He and his men hid out in caves and other strongholds in the wilderness. This story from the end of 2nd Samuel seems to be from such a time. It's one of several stories about David

and his "Mighty men," who were his colleagues in these difficult years, and later leaders of his guards and armed forces when he became king.
Scripture: 2 Samuel 23 **13** And three of the thirty chief men went down, and came about harvest time to David at the cave of Adullam, when a band of Philistines was encamped in the valley of Reph'aim. **14** David was then in the stronghold; and the garrison of the Philistines was then at Bethlehem. **15** And David said longingly, "O that some one would give me water to drink from the well of Bethlehem which is by the gate!" **16** Then the three mighty men broke through the camp of the Philistines, and drew water out of the well of Bethlehem which was by the gate, and took and brought it to David. But he would not drink of it; he poured it out to the Lord, **17** and said, "Far be it from me, O Lord, that I should do this. Shall I drink the blood of the men who went at the risk of their lives?" Therefore he would not drink it. These things did the three mighty men.

We don't know, for certain, the names of these three men. Some commentators give them as Josheb-Basshebeth, Eleazar, and Shammah, "the three" whose deeds are described just before this story. We also have a list of names in 2nd Samuel, 37 of them, who were of "The Thirty" at various times. But there's no way to tell which these particular three are. Some of the names are familiar from other stories: Asahel (army commander Joab's brother), Benaiah (later a captain for Solomon), and Uriah the Hittite (Bathsheba's husband), are on that list. All of these were David's closest and most trusted companions during the difficult years before he became King of Judah, and later King of Israel.

So, here's the situation: David is hiding out in this cave in the wilderness southwest of Jerusalem. Jerusalem was still a Canaanite city, occupied by the Jebusites. Bethlehem was an important town in the lands of the tribe of Judah. The name Bethlehem literally means "House of Bread." We can infer that it was a community rich in agricultural resources. It's where Ruth met Boaz, David's great grandfather, during the time of the Judges.

But something has changed: the Philistines are everywhere. King Saul is still around, but he's dissipating his efforts chasing David instead of protecting the Israelites from the Philistines. They are occupying Israelite territory, likely plundering while they are at it, and they are in Bethlehem in particular. In Chapter 22 of 1st Samuel, there's mention of an occasion when David was hiding in the Cave of Adullum, just after he had escaped Saul the first time. As I understand it

these caves are a network of limestone caves and grottos. Perhaps you have heard of, or visited, Luray Caverns in Virginia, or Mammoth Caverns in Kentucky? These caves seem to be similar. Such caves are a good place to hide, but not a congenial place to live. Over time, David gathered about 400 followers from those who sought refuge there. Psalm 57, a psalm ascribed to David, is thought to be speaking to his situation there in the cave. It's an expression of David's faith.

Psalm 57:1 "Have mercy on me, my God, have mercy on me,
for in you I take refuge.
I will take refuge in the shadow of your wings
until the disaster has passed."

As we read the scripture passage from 1 Samuel 23, it is harvest time. Likely these three men, perhaps with others, brought food to the cave where David and other followers were hiding. David longingly wishes he was able to drink water from the well at Bethlehem, about ten miles away. The well and the water he remembers from his childhood.
"O that some one would give me water to drink from the well of Bethlehem which is by the gate!"

It is not a command. It is not an order. David is just remembering better times, better circumstances, and wishing for that. He knows that he can't go back. The Philistines are there.

Well, these three men got together and decided to go get the well water David longs for. Why did they do that? Surely they knew it was dangerous. In fact, if they were bringing bread, or grain, they may have even just come from the area around Bethlehem. The answer must be because of their love for and loyalty to David. His leadership and love for his followers inspired such devotion.

It's a long way to Bethlehem and back, perhaps with Philistine patrols all about. The Valley of Reph'aim, where the Philistines are encamped, is in between Adullah and Bethlehem. We read that these three heroes "broke through" the camp of the Philistines. The Hebrew word for "break through," means to split, cleave, break open, rip up, or breach**.** As in breaching the wall of a fortress in an attack. It is a word of intense physical force. These three had to somehow fight their way through the Philistines to accomplish their mission. They have fought a battle, and risked their lives, to obtain this precious water for David, their leader.

David refused to drink the water, saying, "*Is it not the blood of the men who went at the risk of their lives?*" He poured it out to the Lord. That was a practice of worship, a Libation. Jacob used a libation of oil to consecrate an altar in Genesis. Libations of wine were part of Temple worship later. This water represented the lives of the three men who had fetched it, out of their love and loyalty to David. Under the Mosaic law the blood of a sacrificed animal is poured out on the altar to the Lord. It represents the life of the animal. So too, David could not drink this water. It had become Holy water, consecrated by the risks of their lives that these three men had ventured on his behalf. Furthermore, David probably realized that his careless words of longing for the water from Bethlehem had put these lives at risk. Perhaps he saw this as a guilt offering – he could not consume this water. It was a fitting offering to God, who had mercifully preserved the lives of these three men. A symbol of their love for David. He poured precious gift out to the Lord.

What David did was an act of leadership. A quiet contrast to the demanding and self-elevating style of the typical monarch or emperor of ancient times. David honored these three men before God, rather than presume to be worthy of such a gift. In doing so, he elevated both himself and these three men before God.

So, where did David learn his leadership skills? Well, where do we learn much of what makes us what we are? In a word, family. David was blessed to have a heritage that came from Ruth and Boaz, through their son Obed, and through his son, David's father Jesse. David grew up as a seventh son, not a privileged oldest son. He learned early, from his time as a shepherd, and the protector of his family's flocks. In all that, he learned to trust and love The Lord.

But, there's another important figure in David's immediate past: Jonathan. Jonathan was King Saul's oldest son, the heir to the throne. He was already a military hero and a follower of God's will. You can read about it in 1 Samuel chapter 14, just before David appears. After David killed the Philistine giant Goliath, Jonathan recognized that God was doing something special with David. He made a covenant with David, and did his utmost to promote David's interests, even above his own, to the disgust of his father King Saul. Jonathan sacrificed his place of honor in favor of David. Such love and sacrifice that Jonathan showed to David was a powerful example. Ultimately, Jonathan was killed with his father Saul by the Philistines at the Battle of Mt. Gilboa. David and his followers were

remaining in the area of Judea. David would go on to become the great King of Israel.

David would have his good and bad moments as King. He did put an end to the threat from the Philistines. He conquered Jerusalem, and brought the Arc of the Covenant there, preparing for the eventual building of the Temple by Solomon. But he had family problems. Most notable of these was his betrayal of trust, in having one of his trusted men, one of "The Thirty," Uriah the Hittite, killed, to cover up his sin with Bathsheba. That betrayal had consequences. David's son Absalom not only killed David's oldest son Amnon, but also tried to overthrow David himself later in his monarchy. Later another son, Adonijah, tried to claim the kingship while David was still alive, in preference to Solomon, David's choice to succeed him. But David genuinely loved God, and was never so high and mighty that he couldn't recognize and acknowledge his own sins. We can recognize his love and trust in God in the text of the 23rd Psalm which we read this morning, and others.

So it was that later, when the Prophets encouraged the Children of Israel in Canaan, or later the exiles of Judah and Jerusalem in Babylon, they looked forward to a new King. That Messiah was envisaged as being like David, the great King from hundreds of years earlier.

In Jesus's day this hope for the appearance of a Davidic Messiah permeated Jewish society. There was a need. During the time of the Maccabees the Jews had successfully revolted against the ruling Seleucid Greek Empire and had become once more an independent Country. But then the Romans had come, and under the Roman governors there was oppression and the seeds of another revolt. Oh, but when would God send His Messiah? A King like David, who would overthrow the Romans, like David conquered the Philistines, and establish God's Kingdom. That Kingdom of Righteousness would have the Jews on top, served by all of the other nations! But there was another model for what the Messiah might be. The suffering servant poems of the prophet Isaiah of the exile include this:

Isaiah 53: **10** Yet it was the will of the Lord to bruise him;
he has put him to grief;[f]
when he makes himself[g] an offering for sin,
he shall see his offspring, he shall prolong his days;
the will of the Lord shall prosper in his hand;
11 he shall see the fruit of the travail of his soul and be satisfied;

by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant,
make many to be accounted righteous;
and he shall bear their iniquities.
12 Therefore I will divide him a portion with the great,
and he shall divide the spoil with the strong;
because he poured out his soul to death,
and was numbered with the transgressors;
yet he bore the sin of many,
and made intercession for the transgressors.

After the Resurrection, the early Church needed to come to an understanding of who Jesus was and what he had done. The Suffering servant of Isaiah was the obvious reference point. That's who Jesus was. Did you notice the reference to libation, a "pouring out?" In verse 12 "he poured out his soul to death, … and made intercession for the transgressors." Like David pouring out that water, consecrated by the actions of the men who loved him, Jesus poured out his own life, and did so to save us all. He was simultaneously the Great King, like David, and yet at the same time the Sacrificial Offering, his life poured out for us.

Jesus said, in the Gospel of John

John 15:12 "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. 13 Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. 14 You are my friends if you do what I command you. …
17 This I command you, to love one another.

I think this act of David, in pouring out to the Lord this great gift of the water from the well at Bethlehem, helps us to better understand the great love that God pours out to us through Jesus. Our response is an obligation to love one another.

Amen.