

“The Madness of King Saul” / I Samuel 16:14-23 / 29 June 2014

Oh, David, play your song. Gently strum the strings of the lyre, that primitive harp; make it sing with all the feeling that only music can express: the longing, the sorrow, the hope, the joy. Make music for a troubled king to hear. You don't know it yet, David, but you will be a troubled king someday. The very same crown that weighs like an anchor on old Saul's worried head will someday burden yours. And so, carefree young shepherd, make your song. Let your music echo down through the years, and return to comfort you when you are old. Just as surely as violence begets violence, like a mathematical equation, so too beauty begets beauty; love begets love; gentleness begets gentleness. Someday you just might become the person who needs your help today.

It all happened years ago, now, but I still well up a little whenever I go back to remember it. Mary lived in a nursing home, the only nursing home for many miles in that small town. She had the misfortune of being assigned to the windowless half of a shared room, squeezed between her roommate's curtain and the doorway to their shared bathroom. Mary had been a first grade teacher back in the days when there was no kindergarten or preschool. That's to say, when a child showed up in Mary's class, it was that child's first time ever to be away from his or her mother. And there they were all of a sudden for a full day without mom, surrounded by kids they didn't know, in a strange place with letters on the walls, and numbers, thirty kids all seated in desks pointed toward a blackboard, the smell of carbolic acid and chalk dust. I don't know if you remember those days, but they're scary at first. Lonely and disconcerting, with the loud bells, and the sad realization that you're one of the many, a face in the crowd, and the noise of all the kids who do know each other laughing, and talking, and sharing their inside jokes. Well, that's where Mary taught for well over thirty years. Just about anyone over fifty in that town had been through her class, and they all sang the praises of a gentle, welcoming teacher. By the time I knew her, though, she was old, and lonely, and clearly very sad.

Mary still had the look of a teacher. When she fixed you with her clear blue eyes, you sensed that she was assessing you, figuring out what grade you deserved. She had the easy elegance of another age, not superior but genteel and kind. Each time I visited her in her cramped little half-room, she pointed proudly to outdated photographs of her family, faraway in California: two daughters, two sons-in-law, and four beautiful grandchildren, some of whom she'd never even met. But I could tell from the grainy quality of the pictures, from the style of the clothes, the size of the collars, that the photos were old. Grandchildren who appeared to be eight or nine were surely on the verge of graduating from high school, in real life. Still, our conversation always turned to the ones she loved, who lived so far away. She got the occasional phone call from one of her daughters on Mother's Day and on Christmas. They sent her nice cards for her 90th birthday. But they never came to see her, and Mary's sadness was palpable.

When Mary began edging close to death, she started talking to me happily about Tina. “Oh, Tina came to see me today. I never thought I would see Tina again. Tina brought me those flowers. Tina washed my hair.” In all truth, I believed Tina was an imaginary friend. Or perhaps, I thought with sadness, Tina was the name of one of her daughters, and Mary was just dreaming or pretending that her daughter was really present with her. It was just after Mary's death, before her funeral, that I came across Tina in the halls of the nursing home. I said, “Tina! You're real? Mary has been talking so much about you these past few weeks. Are you a niece or something?”

I was taken aback by Tina's reply. “No, Mrs. Shay's family has all moved out west.” It seemed curious to me that Tina called Mary “Mrs. Shay.” Tina went on to say, “I didn't know Mrs. Shay was still alive, but I was here visiting my mother-in-law a few months ago when I saw her sitting alone in the dining room. I introduced myself, and she remembered me! Mrs. Shay was my first grade teacher, fifty years ago. I was so scared when I started school that I just cried and cried. All the other kids made fun of me, and I didn't know anyone, but Mrs. Shay held me on her lap for, like, three whole days. She let me hold her free hand when she was writing on the blackboard. She was so nice to me...” Tina never finished her sentence, but I know what she meant to say: “Mary was my mother when my

my own mother couldn't be there, and so, fifty years later, I was her daughter when her own daughters were not." Oh, Mary—"Mrs. Shay"—sing your song! Your song of kindness to a scared little girl came back to comfort you, to give you friendship and family when you were old and alone.

Now, I'm not saying that nice people always get happy endings. That would be untrue. Even Mary's ending was not altogether "happy," for though she was overjoyed to have Tina with her, still she longed for her daughters. No, I don't mean to say that those who give out goodness will only ever receive goodness. But helping others is always done from a position of power: the teacher showing extraordinary kindness to a student; the upper middle class suburbanites sending money and books to an inner city school; or as in today's reading, the happy young shepherd playing music for the depressed king. Helping is done from a position of power, but power doesn't last. So, play a soothing song for the troubled king in your life. Someday you may wear his heavy crown.

It's a haunting account from the annals of Israel's sacred history. Too bad this short tale in I Samuel never made it into the calendar of Bible readings that we use for preaching in mainline Protestant churches. It's the sad, unsettling narrative of one man's descent into mental illness, the madness of King Saul. It occurs long before the advent of psychotropic drugs. In ancient times, there was no concept of mental disease, just "evil spirits," and they were sent by God, no less! (Which is more disturbing in this text, the primitive notions about mental health or the primitive beliefs about God?) Even the writers of the Bible were limited by the scientific and theological assumptions of their day, just as we are often confined to the assumptions of our day. Jesus came along to show us a different God from the one here who sends evil spirits on hapless and heavyhearted kings. And yet, there is about this text some ring of unchanging truth, too, for it speaks to the human condition: Power wanes; confidence fails. There are many bends in this river of life; we don't know what lies beyond the next one. We don't know for sure what unexpected lands we'll visit before our journey's through. But the music that we make today will catch up to us later in life. And so, we must be kind to those whose burdens we do not yet fully understand, for someday we may be one of them.

If you could go back in time—which would be disastrous, of course—but if you could go back in time to whisper just one little bit of advice into your own ear, what would it be? I'm not talking about advising yourself on specific situations, like, "Don't take that job," or, "Marry this one, not that one." That's too easy. If I wanted our time travel game to be that easy, then I'd tell my younger self to go to a state school and just embrace baldness. But I want you to go back in time and give yourself some more general, philosophical advice about how to live and be in the world, advice about how to handle sorrow, how to manage success, perhaps a few words about the things that scare you and shouldn't, or the things that don't and should. What would you have to say to your past self, if ever you could speak to him or her? Many of us bloom so late in life. The years bring their wisdom, and wisdom brings joy, but it all happens so late that we only get a decade or fifteen years to savor it.

Perhaps you could just sneak back in time and find your younger self in an idle moment, waiting for an elevator, trying to sleep, sitting alone on a bus. Once you get over the initial shock of seeing yourself so young, what would you whisper in your own younger ear? Oh the simple truths that no one ever bothered to tell you, the treasures of wisdom that could have made life so much happier and less painful. I think I'd tell my younger self not to worry so much, that things in life work out, mostly. And when they don't work out, there's a strength that comes from outside of you, usually only just enough strength for the moment at hand, but strength enough to bear you through all manner of change and loss. I'd tell him that things don't have to be quite so hard as we sometimes make them, and that courage only comes from dwelling on the possible and the good. Maybe I'd tell him that the world is confusing, and beautiful, and terrible, and boring, and that things will happen. Mostly just don't be afraid. No amount of anxiety can guarantee the future, just as no amount of regret can fix the past, but the grace of God in Christ is to live most of our moments free of anxiety and regret, free to embrace the world at hand with its beauty and its pain, with its tasks and its callings, for in the end, the small things are the big things, and many of the seemingly big things, the attainments, the trophies, the victories, the

rank and privilege: these matter not a whit. I'd tell him that it doesn't matter how much power you wield or how much money you make. If you treat people right—including yourself—if you keep your promises and respect people, then you'll have the daily joy of a clear conscience, which no money or power can buy. That's pretty much what I'd tell my former self, if I could. I'd try to save him some wasted years, some lonely times, some misspent energies. Would he believe me? Yes, probably. Would he follow my advice? No. No, he had to make all his own mistakes, as did you, and as you do still, and as does everyone you love. And alas, we don't get a dress rehearsal in this life of years; there is no going back. And that's surely a good thing.

An announcement on a bulletin board at Yale University read: “The Yale Association of Time Travelers has postponed this week's meeting until yesterday. Your punctuality is appreciated.” And of course you remember the low-budget Doritos ad that appeared during this past Superbowl. A man is walking down the street eating a bag of Doritos. Little Jimmy tricks the man into a big cardboard box and tells him that it's a time machine that runs on Doritos. Jimmy steals the Doritos and runs. When the gullible snacker emerges from the machine, an old man comes to chase him off his lawn. The snacker assumes that the old man is future Jimmy and hugs him.

Traveling back in time would be disastrous at worst and fruitless at best. But traveling into the future is almost unthinkable. And yet, consider it. In the imaginative world of the biblical narratives, the young shepherd boy David—by playing his lyre for old King Saul—is reaching out to touch the weary old King David that he will someday be, his future self. I wonder if old King David, in later years, ever picked up his dusty old, long-disused lyre to pluck again at its strings? Did he ever use it to calm his own savage breast, racked with guilt for the murder of Urriah, for his lies, for his endless quest for women and power, for the death of his rebellious son? What would young David say to old David if he could speak across the years? Well, what would a younger you say to the person you are today? What if your younger, fresher, less-wise-but-more-idealistic self could see where you are today—physically, emotionally, financially, morally? What would he or she say? Would she take you to task for all the dreams too soon abandoned, for the people you gave up on too soon, for the hopes that got lost amid the slurry of less important things? Would he remind you of your old ideals of goodness, truth, and beauty—all ideals that you long-since traded for a piece of the American pie? Would she weep to see your current state or rejoice? Are you, the responsible adult, being faithful to the hopeful visions and dreams that were planted in your heart long ago? Are you living for ideals that would make the younger you proud, or have you traded in your lyre—your music—for a heavy crown?

Well, it doesn't really matter. You cannot go back to whisper advice into your own young ear, and your younger self cannot step across the decades to offer you praise and encouragement—or even judgment. And yet, remember the story of Mary and Tina. Someday you might be that person who needs your help today. Make for this world and all its sad kings a song you would love to hear when you are weak or in need. Make for this world and all its broken people, a song of hope, and hope will probably return to you when you need it. Make for your sad king a song of joy, and don't be surprised when joy finds its way back to you. So much of life will conspire to steal your song and fit you with a heavy crown, to weigh down your head and crush your spirit. Do not dance to the deathly tune. Play songs of life for stranger and friend, for someday you will find that yours was part of that greater song, the great chorus of all the living, glorious and tragic, beautiful and sad, majestic triumphant in the end, filled with deepest joy. We don't know where life will take us, but make the music of love today. The music you make today will surely come back to to you in the end. Amen.