

Sermon by the Rector  
Proper 8-B  
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At his press conference last week, South Carolina's Governor Mark Sanford compared himself to the Biblical King David.

In one sense the comparison was apt. David spent some time hiking his own Appalachian Trail, and experienced some "sparking" in his relationships with women he wasn't married to.

But Governor Sanford's press conference was, by most accounts, meandering, incoherent, not well-planned and lacking focus. David would never have presented himself to the public in this way. Everything David did was calculated, strategic - never meandering or lacking focus.

Take the magnificent lament he intones today on learning of the death of his king, Saul and his warrior friend, Saul's son Jonathan. Clearly, it's heartfelt, spoken "From the depths" (Psalm 130) of David's being. But it also has a precisely-defined practical and political purpose. David intends to succeed Saul as king, and he must secure the loyalty of Saul's followers. They comprise a key constituency in the coalition he's building. So he eulogizes Saul and Saul's heir publicly, eloquently, convincingly. Soon Saul's partisans will be David's.

This strain of calculation and strategy runs through the other readings today. Paul has a specific goal in mind as he writes to the Corinthians. Famine has befallen the Jewish Christians, the "saints", in Jerusalem. He appeals to the better-off Christian communities in the port cities around the Mediterranean to make a generous offering to relieve the suffering of the Jerusalem Christians. He deploys several rhetorical weapons to accomplish his goals:

- 1) flattery: as you display extraordinary gifts in all that you do, now display extraordinary generosity in this offering
- 2) rebuke (albeit gently phrased): remember you started this good work last year, and it's a good thing to finish what you start, with alacrity

3) call to gratitude, and enlightened self-interest: you enjoy abundance now, and they face scarcity; in the future, this situation may be reversed, so it's best to secure the good will of persons you may need to ask for help someday.

And Jesus himself displays an aptitude for strategizing in the healing of Jairus's daughter. He's conscious of his surroundings - the first requirement for strategic thinking - as he walks to the leader's house: he "overhears" what's being said about the goings-on, and responds immediately so as to keep Jairus from being discouraged by the people's murmuring. When he gets to Jairus's house, he selects just three of his followers to go into the girl's room with him - perhaps the three who most need to witness this miracle, or whom he most needs to bear witness to it. This will be the first time Jesus raises someone from the dead. He's careful (calculating?) about who's going to see it, and from what perspective.

A college professor of mine used to greet his freshman English lit class by asking, "Growing up means learning how to lie, doesn't it?" I didn't think the answer was yes then, and I still don't think it is.

But growing up does mean learning how to be calculating, how to think strategically, how to take one's audience into account, how to present oneself in a nuanced and calibrated way. This aspect of "growing up" is an antidote for the self-pity which sometimes tempts us, the whining in which we sometimes overhear ourselves indulging: "I've got some ideas about how things should be, a vision of where I, or we, should be heading, but nobody's really interested in what I have to say, so I'll just muddle through and learn not to hope for much." Recognize this childish voice?

Over against it speaks the voice of what we might call maturity: "How can I, or we, get from here to there? Whom do I need to cultivate and convince? How can I build support for what I think is important?"

David thinks in this way, as does Paul; so, in his own way, does Jesus himself.

In Jesus' teaching, though, it's never enough to be as wise as serpents, necessary though this may be. We also have to seek the innocence of doves. Keeping the demon of self-pity away by learning to be calculating, to think strategically, we must not lose the capacity for pity itself.

"Pity" is not a popular word these days. It's come to imply condescension, and in many contexts its use is politically incorrect. I'd like to reclaim and rehabilitate it.

"Pity", at its root, means something like compassion. It's the capacity to feel another's suffering in my own person. The remarkable encounter between Jesus and the woman who suffers from internal bleeding shows us its essence. Power goes forth from Jesus to her, merely by her touching of his garment. This is primordial pity, a feeling of solidarity with another that lies below, or beyond, the level of consciousness. Perfectly capable of calculation, Jesus remains also capable of the most deep-seated pity, a power that wells up "from the depths."

David also shows himself capable of pity. There's no doubt that the eulogy of his friendship with Jonathan – a love surpassing the love of women – comes from the heart, yielding an almost overwhelming grief, and pity for his fallen comrade. Some students of the Bible believe the love David evokes is sexual in nature, others that it represents the blood bond between warriors. It might be both. It is certainly, and deeply, heartfelt.

God, as always, has placed us in an uncomfortable, demanding "in-between" position. Wise as serpents, innocent as doves. Required to think strategically, to learn calculation, nuance, calibration, in order to reach maturity and strip self-pity of its power. But required, also, to remember how to feel pity, to allow power, and mercy, and love to go forth from us when human struggle and suffering touches, in some way, the fringe of our garment.

Jesus walked this path. It's the high road to the fullness of our God-given humanity, the special vocation of those created to be "but little lower than the angels."

Some of the public figures we hear about daily show forth this uniquely human journey in their speech and action.

President Obama certainly knows how to think and act strategically. His capacity for nuance and calibration in public utterances reassures me; he's likely to say the right thing when many are listening, and much depends on his words. But the jury's still out, I think, on the "innocent as a dove" part of him. Does he feel in his own person the suffering and struggle of others? Of the Iranian demonstrators, yearning to breathe the air of freedom? Of

gay and lesbian Americans, tired of waiting for the full measure of freedom this nation purports to offer?

Michael Jackson, may he rest in peace, seemed to reach maturity before our very eyes in the early 1980's. He took control of his destiny, founding his own record label, producing an album so attuned to the times that it sold far more copies than any other in history. Most notably, he used the power of his label strategically, forcing MTV to dramatically increase the airtime given to music videos made by African-American artists and producers. How sad it was, then, to see him descend from that pinnacle into self-pity and what we might call a parody of real pity, made more tragic by his seeming lack of awareness that his relationships with young boys didn't represent compassion but a terrible perversion of it.

I cite these public figures and their flaws, real or potential, not to judge them but to demonstrate our shared humanity. Wise as serpents – grown up, capable of calculation, committed to strategic thinking; innocent as doves – possessed of a heart that can be moved to pity, from which power and mercy and love go forth in the presence of human suffering and struggle: God calls us to both. We'll usually fall short of the fullness of this call. But God still calls us, teaches and forms us. Guided by God's strategic pity, God's compassionate calculation, we'll get where we're supposed to be in God's good time.