

## ORDINARY PEOPLE:

### PALTIEL

2 Samuel 3:12-16

*A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward on the Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time, June 24, 2018, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia, as part of a summer sermon series entitled “Ordinary People.”*

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*Abner sent messengers to David at Hebron, saying, ‘To whom does the land belong? Make your covenant with me, and I will give you my support to bring all Israel over to you.’ [David] said, ‘Good; I will make a covenant with you. But one thing I require of you: you shall never appear in my presence unless you bring Saul’s daughter Michal when you come to see me.’*

*Then David sent messengers to Saul’s son Ishbaal, saying, ‘Give me my wife Michal, to whom I became engaged at the price of one hundred foreskins of the Philistines.’ Ishbaal sent and took her from her husband Paltiel the son of Laish. But her husband went with her, weeping as he walked behind her all the way to Bahurim.*

*Then Abner said to him, ‘Go back home!’ So he went back.*

So with Patrick’s lengthy and mysterious sermon title of last week – “Veja Du and the Evil of Two Lessers” – I thought I you might appreciate something short and simple this week: Paltiel.

Feel better?

#### I.

Paltiel is probably the most obscure of the eight Biblical characters on whom I am preaching this summer. As I have circulated the titles in this series among staff and members, no one has come up to me and said: “I’m so glad you are preaching on Paltiel.”

Paltiel’s story is as short and simple as his renown.

- He appears only once in the entire Bible.
- He is identified as the son of Laish, who appears in scripture only to be specified as Paltiel’s father.<sup>1</sup>
- Paltiel is from Gallim,<sup>2</sup> a village north of Jerusalem, mentioned at only one other place in scripture.<sup>3</sup>
- In the lengthy struggle on the part of King Saul to prevent David from succeeding him as King sooner rather than later, Saul had presented his daughter Michal to David in marriage.<sup>4</sup>
- But Saul’s sense of threat from David grew and his rage increased, to the point that Michal once had to help David secretly escape from Saul’s efforts to kill him.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I Samuel 25:44.

<sup>2</sup> I Samuel 25:44.

<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 10:30.

<sup>4</sup> I Samuel 18:17-30.

<sup>5</sup> I Samuel 19:8-17.

- Saul had then annulled Michal’s marriage to David and then for some unspecified reason, given Michal to Paltiel in another arranged marriage.<sup>6</sup>
- While we do not know how many years Paltiel and Michal live together, nor how *Michal* came to *feel* about Paltiel, it is apparent – as we shall see – that *Paltiel* grew *to love deeply* this woman to whom he had been assigned in marriage on orders from her father the King.
- In time, Saul died in battle, defeated by the forces of David.<sup>7</sup>
- Abner, the late King’s chief military officer, saw the tides of history turning toward David, switched allegiances, asked David if he would become King of both Israel and Judah.<sup>8</sup>
- David had only one condition: “Bring Michal back as my wife.”
- David likely surmised that if he were reunited with Michal, the subjects and citizens who had lingering loyalty to the House of Saul would be more apt to be pacified if Saul’s daughter were their queen.
- Since the power of the state – particularly under military rule – is almost unlimited, David’s newly-minted military aide Abner took Michal from her husband Paltiel and brought her to the court of David.

At this point the brilliant narrator of First and Second Samuel describes the human side of what happened.

*But [Michal’s] husband [Paltiel]  
Went with her,  
Weeping  
As he walked behind her  
All the way to Bahurim.  
Then Abner said to [Paltiel],  
‘Go back home!’  
So he went back.*

Within the next few scenes:

- Abner is assassinated.<sup>9</sup>
- Michal is given quarters in the palace she never appears to share with David and in which David later curses her to barrenness.<sup>10</sup>
- And Paltiel walks off the pages of scripture never to be heard from again.

Thus in the midst of court intrigue, divisiveness within the kingdom, and violence both familial and national, the narrator pauses to depict the poignant weeping of Paltiel.

- Why?

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<sup>6</sup> I Samuel 25:44.

<sup>7</sup> I Samuel 31.

<sup>8</sup> II Samuel 3:6-11.

<sup>9</sup> II Samuel 3:17-39.

<sup>10</sup> II Samuel 6:20-23.

- Why is Paltiel’s story recounted in scripture?
- Why are the sounds of an ordinary man, wailing uncontrollably over the loss of his wife, included in this portion of the book about kings and empires?
- What does the narrator intend us to learn from the placing of the microphone to the lips of Paltiel that our ears might hear his mournful cry?

## II.

As rabbinical scholars studied Paltiel over the centuries, they have tended to focus less on the *richness* of his love for Michal as opposed to the restraining of its expression.

You see, once David became King, it was not entirely proper that he would be married to a woman who had been married to another man, even though *he* had been married to her before.

- Scholars noticed that Paltiel’s name meant “God has saved me from sin.”
- They began to surmise that the marriage between Paltiel and Michal was never consummated, thus rendering David’s action in remarrying her less inappropriate and saving him from *some* scorn in the eyes of the public.
- They even speculated that Paltiel had placed a sword in the marriage bed between himself and Michal, so that they would remain chaste.

One ancient source concludes of Paltiel’s weeping:

...[He followed her] to the town called *Bahurim* (literally, *youths*) implying that they both had remained like unmarried youths and not tasted the pleasure of marital relations.<sup>11</sup>

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But in the 1990s, British rabbi Jonathan Magonet focused on a *simpler* and *more likely* reason for Paltiel’s tears: namely, that he loved Michal. In this interpretation, Paltiel was an *ordinary* man who loved his wife and wept openly – even in front of soldiers and politicians – as she was led away from him, against his will and against any power he had to intercede.

Magonet goes on to describe this scene as “one of those remarkable...moments” in scripture, in which, through the power of the text *itself*, we as readers are forced

- To confront the dark side of a heroic character like David
- To ask what really matters
- And to ask what price what might be *too high* to pay for something.

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<sup>11</sup> From Sanhedrin 19b. The above paragraphs are available at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Palti,\\_son\\_of\\_Laish](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Palti,_son_of_Laish).

“Paltiel loses his wife,” Magonet adds, “but for one brief moment he helps turn our perception of the world inside out.”<sup>12</sup>

### III.

One of the best known novels of the late Gabriel Garcia Marquez is entitled *Love in a Time of Cholera*.<sup>13</sup> It is a title that could describe Paltiel:

- In a time of the cholera of corruption, Paltiel *loves* Michal.
- In a time of violence, Paltiel *weeps* over her loss.
- In a time of raw political power exercised without concern for the impact it has on the people it affects, Paltiel *weeps* openly for the person he *loves*,
  - In front of the military commander who removed her from his home and life
  - In front of soldiers who surround that commander, take their orders, draw their livelihood in his employ
  - In front of citizens who live under that commander’s often iron sway
  - In front of political leaders who rule the day.
- Paltiel expresses his unbridled love through tears, without regard to the cost of such expression or who might witness his agony.

Thus, in a story filled with characters who exemplify the *Fall* of the human race more evidently than they exemplify our *Creation* in the image of God, Paltiel embodies the *best* of what God creates: the capacity for unbridled love of one human being for another.

*...her husband went with her,  
Weeping as he walked behind her  
All the way to Bahurim.*

“To *love* like that.” “To *be loved* like that.” *Love in a time of cholera.*

### IV.

This past week, through intense media coverage in our nation and around the world, we have seen and heard the cries of children stopped at the border between our country and Mexico and separated from their parents who have been trying to enter, most if not all illegally.

The cries and pressure to end such separation has arisen – I believe – out of a deep-seated human belief that no state – no external force – should *ever* separate a parent from a child except in those unfortunate circumstances in which a child must be protected from its parents.

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<sup>12</sup> Jonathan Magonet, *Bible Lives* (London: SCM Press, 1992), 91. Also available at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Palti,\\_son\\_of\\_Laish](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Palti,_son_of_Laish).

<sup>13</sup> Gabriel Garcia Marquez, *Love In A Time of Cholera*, published in 1985.

Just as Rachel's weeping for her children in the Book of Genesis reverberates through history into the time of Christ,<sup>14</sup> just as Paltiel's cries were heard by soldiers and citizens in his day and remembered in Scripture for our day, the cries of children separated from their parents at the border are being rightly heard in our day.

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In this wonderful sanctuary in which we worship, in this community of privilege which surrounds it, few – though some – of us have been threatened by the force of the state standing between us and a person we love. Though no Abner has likely pointed his bayonet at us and said, “Go back home,” there are barriers and threats we face that arise between us and the person we most dearly love.

Some of the barriers are virtually *unavoidable*:

- Demands of work that will not let us go
- Confidentiality that prevents us from sharing with our spouses or children information about clients, patients, or national security planning in which we are involved and weighs heavily on our mind
- Responsibilities for children, aging parents, suffering siblings, welcome but needful grandchildren, ill or dying neighbors that one or both of us have taken on.

Some barriers that arise between us and the person we love are rooted in *the tragic dimension of nature*, the seemingly intractable consequences of the Fall:

- Illness mental or physical
- Premature loss of body or mind
- Infertility
- Addiction
- Aging
- Death
- The effects of abuse, past or present, whose trauma it leaves behind are like waves of the sea that are never stilled even by the command of Christ.<sup>15</sup>

But among the many aspects of good news in the Old and New Testaments, in Judaism and Christianity and doubtless in other world religions as well, is this: *The most important and significant aspect of creation is love, especially the love of one person for another.*

- The love of Paltiel for Michal
- The love of a parent for a child, a child for a parent
- The love each of us *has for* or *has received from* the most important person in our lives
- The love for which each of us prays.

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<sup>14</sup> Jeremiah 31:15; Matthew 21:18.

<sup>15</sup> Mark 4:35-41.

Scripture narrates sixteen chapters of unvarnished success on the part of King David leading the people of God to unity and prosperity,<sup>16</sup> followed by sixteen chapters of his kingdom falling into disarray, dysfunction, and violence, largely of his own making.<sup>17</sup> The narrator of scripture depicts David as the boy shepherd,<sup>18</sup> the slayer of Goliath,<sup>19</sup> the sweet singer of Israel,<sup>20</sup> the greatest king in Israel's history and the ancestor of the Messiah, Jesus Christ.<sup>21</sup> The narrator also depicts what David did to Bathsheba and her husband Uriah,<sup>22</sup> and the deep and violent scars that left in his own family and kingdom.<sup>23</sup>

But in the midst of the “cholera-laden” story of David’s meritorious rise and self inflicted fall, the narrator inserts one scene for our memory:

...[Michal's] husband went with her,  
weeping as he walked behind her  
all the way to Bahurim.

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When I told this story to someone outside the church this week, the person quoted to me a saying that has become popular in recent years. “*Grief is love that has no place to go.*”

There is truth behind this saying, but the more I think about it, the more I conclude that at least in Paltiel’s case, his grieving love does have a place to go.

His love of Michal  
Rises from the pages of scripture,  
Crosses cultures, eras, and time zones.

When we hear the cries  
Of this ordinary man  
Unashamedly weeping  
For the woman he loves,  
We are reminded  
That the most important thing in the world  
Is the love of one human being for another.

Amen.

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<sup>16</sup> I Samuel 16 through II Samuel 10.

<sup>17</sup> II Samuel 11 through I Kings 2.

<sup>18</sup> I Samuel 17:34-37.

<sup>19</sup> I Samuel 17.1-57.

<sup>20</sup> II Samuel 23:1.

<sup>21</sup> Matthew 1:1.

<sup>22</sup> II Samuel 11.

<sup>23</sup> II Samuel 12:1-15, played out in the remaining chapters through I Kings 2.