

The Love that Risks Rejection
I Samuel 8:4-10, 19-20; 10:17-19
Luke 4:1-13

“But today you have rejected your God, who saves you from all your calamities and your distresses; and you have said, ‘No! but set a king over us.’”

Given that today happens to be Valentine’s Day and as a preface to our Lenten series on the love of God, I want to step back for a few minutes from the two stories before us in order to think together about the sweep of the love story the Bible tells. From the start, it is the story of a lover’s pursuit of the beloved, the lover being God and the beloved being you and me. For the most part, God is portrayed as a spurned lover who never gives up on the beloved. Yet this is not a Romeo and Juliet tragedy, a tale of fated characters whose star-crossed lives end in death. Rather, *this* lover created us in love and destined us in love, but between the beginning and the end this lover set the beloved free to love him or leave him.

Put another way, God the Lover, the protagonist of the story and its author, has created an antagonist, according to Jack Miles in his endlessly provocative book *God a Biography*, an antagonist whose interactions with God shape the action. Actually, the antagonist and the beloved turn out to be one and the same. We are both! Miles goes on to observe that the God who is *this* God is uniquely dependent upon his human antagonists. While other religions tell stories of their gods frolicking offstage, we have no adventures of God apart from the adventure that is God’s pursuit of us. In fact, I think it fair to say that this is one of those love stories filled with pathos, because God wants this relationship so much more than we do.

What, then, is God to do? “God could conceivably engage in some kind of demonstrative action,” Miles supposes, “that would serve his own self-presentation apart from any interaction with human beings—miraculous displays, cosmic disruptions, the creation of other worlds.” Instead God keeps pursuing a relationship with us in such a way that we are free to turn our backs on God. God does this because that is the sort of love that God is; that is the way of God’s love with the world and the creatures God has created, a love that risks rejection.

The story from I Samuel is more than a case in point: it is a fork in the road of the relationship between God and the people God has chosen to love. Up until this moment in the story, God has assumed that the guidance and protection, the governance and direction with which God has led them (from Egypt through the wilderness to the promised land) has been more than enough to sustain them. Having just survived a harrowing encounter with the Philistines, the Israelites think otherwise: think a human monarch might do a better job. They tell Samuel the time has come for them to have a visible, tangible, powerful king, a ruler who would meet their needs for security, prosperity, victory and, well, would make them great again. “Israel is frightened and too self-confident,” Walter Brueggemann says. “Israel imagines a different security system, which causes Israel to reject its own memory and therefore to give up on its posture of trust and gratitude.” Words too close to our common life for comfort!

In response to the people’s demand, God simply could have said, “No!” I am God. You are my people. That is the deal. End of discussion. But instead God hears their request, respects their free choice to reject the relationship, and says to Samuel, “Listen to their voice. Warn them and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them.” In a stunning speech that bears repeating again and again, Samuel tells the people that a king will take your sons to be soldiers and slaves, your daughters to be concubines and cooks, your fields and vineyards will be appropriated, your grain and livestock taxed.” The people refuse to listen. A king, they say, will not only govern them but will assure them victory in battle. Samuel reported the words of the people “in the ears of the Lord” and God said, “Listen to their voice and set a king over them....They have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them.”

It seems to me, given the sort of love that *this* God is, God could respond in no other way: no miraculous displays, no cosmic disruptions, no abandonment of the beloved in favor of another people or a different world. The sort of love that *this* God is, is a love that is dependent on the freedom of the beloved to love in return—or not. Coercion, compulsion, force and control do not avail. The love God is is a love more vulnerable to our fickle selves that we can fathom. It is a love that risks rejection.

Saul, therefore, becomes king over Israel; and after Saul, David; and with David, God comes to God’s own fork in the road. Remember last Sunday when God talked to Moses in the tent of meeting as one talks to a friend? Whether as a friend or a lover, from the beginning God’s relationship to the people and to those called by God to lead the people has been a relationship of choice on God’s part. With David, everything changes. In the face of David’s faults and failures mixed in with David’s love and loyalty, God says to David, “I will be a father to him and he shall

be a son to me. When he does wrong, I will chastise him...but I will never withdraw my favor (my love) from him.” God’s love is now the love of a parent for a child. God risks God’s future completely, unconditionally, when God acknowledges that God’s love for David and David’s offspring is the love of a father.

Parental love, Miles writes, “is not a conditional state. A father’s love of a son cannot cease to be such. If a father disinherits a son, he is the father of a disinherited son. If a [mother] denies a [daughter], [she] is the mother of a [denied] daughter...” if a parent loses a son or a daughter, they are parents of a child they have lost to life or to death. I know this love only as I have received it and as I have stood by your helpless sides while you watch your own children become who they are in freedom. I would be remiss if I did not credit Matt Gaventa’s sermon* last Sunday for filling in the blanks of a father’s love in a way that I cannot. Reading the story of the transfiguration as a story of a father’s helpless love for his son on the way to death, Matt reflects on his own vulnerability as a father who loves his son: “...being sick is just the first of how many experiences of the world that [my son] is going to have,” Matt says, “that are completely out of my hands...because he will go to his own school and he will make his own friends and he will find his own way. And some days school will be hard. And some days his friends will let him down. And someday somebody will break his heart. And someday he will grieve for somebody he loves. And I can’t fix it. I can’t help it. And I can’t go there with him.”

Matt goes on to say that God does go there with him. Yet Matt knows this not because of some miraculous display or cosmic disruption. He knows it as he has known the vulnerable love of God for him in the life, death and resurrection of God’s Son, God’s only Son, God’s beloved. Yet if I am reading the story before us at the beginning of Luke honestly, I would have to say that Jesus also was loved with the love that risks rejection, the love that gave him the freedom not to love us as God loves us, that gave him a choice: would he be the ruler, the king, the gimme Savior that we want or the vulnerable lover whose love risks our rejection?

The antagonist in the story, the devil, a stand-in really for our endless testing of God, our goading God to be the kind of God who meets all our needs, who secures our lives with power, who proves that God really exists with miraculous saves, the devil converses with Jesus just after Jesus alone has heard God’s voice at his baptism. “You are my Son, the Beloved,” the voice from heaven said. Still dripping with water, Jesus is led by the Spirit in the wilderness where, for forty days, he eats nothing. He is famished, which is to say, *he* is vulnerable, needy, human.

“If you are God’s Son,” the devil says as though the devil knows what it is to be God’s Son, “command this stone to become a loaf of bread.” Remembering when Israel was famished and in the same situation in the wilderness, when God humbled them and then fed them with manna so they would understand that they live not by bread but by God’s upholding and directing and governing and sustaining word, Jesus rejects the miraculous display. Jesus chooses to love us with the love that risks rejection.

Again the devil offers power and glory if Jesus will put all his trust in the source of earthly power and glory. Whether that source is the fawning adoration of the masses or the steely calculations of the entitled, the choice is to be the king we desire or the love for which we were made. Again Jesus remembers when Moses told the people that God had set God’s heart on them and had chosen them out of all the peoples. God is not partial and takes no bribe, Moses says, but “executes justice for the orphan and the widow, loves the stranger, providing food and clothing for them.” In response to the love that God is and risking rejection himself, Jesus puts all his trust in this God alone.

Finally on the pinnacle of the temple, the height of established religion, the devil says, “If you are the Son of God...” dare God to be the kind of God who coerces people by miraculous displays that may save them from destruction at noonday but leave no room for human freedom. One last time Jesus remembers the words of Moses to the people God has chosen to love: Do not put God to the test of being the God you want rather than the God who loves you with the love that risks your rejection.

Because Jesus is God’s Son, revealing in every word said and every action dared the love that risks rejection, you and I will join the congregation in his hometown synagogue that tries to run him off a cliff, join the disciples that doubt him at every turn in the road, join the religious leaders who reject him on the basis of the religion we love more than we love God, join the crowds whose adoration is but the other side of abandonment. Paradoxically, our rejection of him simply underlines the truth that he is the Son of *this* God, this lover who pursues us still.

What are we to do? More than Valentine’s Day, it is the first Sunday in the season when we do business with the way we have loved or failed to love God and one another. “Love one another,” Jesus said, “as I have loved you.” Lent is a fork in the road. As God in Christ has loved us, let us love even our antagonists with the love that risks rejection. Amen.

*<http://mattgaventa.com/2016/02/07/they-grow-up-so-fast/>