

“God will devise a way”

II Samuel 14:14

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What do you do with a verse like the one we find in Second Samuel? What do you do when you find a bold declaration of the gospel hidden in the middle of a story of family conflict and chaos? A king and his son are estranged. The king is David, the son is Absalom. The reasons for the estrangement are many, tracing their roots to David’s ill-advised affair with Bathsheba; having a family with one husband, many wives, and numerous children from these multiple marriages; a half-brother seducing his half-sister which evokes the ire of the half-sister’s whole brother who then murders the guilty half-brother. Does it surprise you there is estrangement in this story?

And right in the middle of it all a woman approaches the king with the sole purpose of getting him to invite the banished son, the one named Absalom, back into the fold. Why? Because the woman is convinced that is what God would do. When she speaks, she speaks the good news of the gospel in a nutshell. “God does not take away life; instead, he devises ways so that a banished person may not remain estranged from him.” Immediately my mind was filled with images of the many ways God has devised so that his children would not remain estranged from him.

There was the day God showed up out by the great trees of Mamre, where Abraham sat out in front of his tent. It was a blazing hot day. God showed up in a robe, probably flannel. The idea of God enduring what every kid has endured who ever played a shepherd in a Christmas pageant strikes me as just a little bit funny. The robe probably did not fit just right, it was scratching against his neck, the day was so hot you know the Lord was sweating. This God devises the strangest ways to save his people.

And if you think it is strange that God is in a bath-robe, just wait until the Lord speaks. “I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son.” Sarah, somewhere in her 80’s at this time, falls down in the tent laughing.

Or can you imagine God dressing up in a wrestler’s suit. You know the kind. Even stretched out completely they don’t really do all that good a job of covering the wearer. But here is our God, bouncing into the ring, circling his opponent, eye-balling that one named Jacob, warily waiting to see what moves that wily deceiver was going to roll out. They fall together and set to a wrestling match that lasts until daybreak, panting and sweating and struggling. God leaves victorious, but not before Jacob wrangles a new name for himself, and for his people. The name is Israel, because Jacob struggled with God and with men and overcame. Jacob limps away from the scene of the battle with a sore hip, and we are left to marvel at the marvelous ways God devises to save his people.

God was not above pyrotechnics. He made himself into a little bush stuck somewhere way out in the middle of the Midian desert. As an old shepherd makes his way ever closer to the bush, God tests out the ignition switch. Flame on. Check. Flame off. Check. He adjusts the flame so that it is dazzling but not dangerous. At one point he cranks it up a little too much, the temperature spikes, and the Lord cries out, “Moses, that’s hot!” And the shepherd, hearing his name, comes to see the strange sight. Here is a bush that burns but is not consumed. It is from that very burning bush that God reveals himself by the holy name of Yahweh, I am who I am.

Yes indeed, God is very good at devising ways to save his people. He holds a beauty contest where numerous women parade before a king with an insatiable appetite for food, drink, and pleasures of all sorts. The young girl who is selected to be the

king's bride turns out to be a Jew. It turns out God was not so interested in beauty pageants as he was in saving the Jewish people, and Esther finds out she was put on the throne at just the right time to be an agent for salvation for the whole Jewish people.

So it is not such a big surprise that this God who takes such pleasure in devising ways to save his people would put on a great big diaper, wrap himself in swaddling cloths, climb into a manger, and take on the name of Jesus, the baby boy born to Mary and Joseph. Nor is it a surprise to see him as a young man don a swimsuit and join the rest of the sinful swimmers out by the Jordan River who jumped into the waters of baptism. Or to take a turn playing king and climbing on a donkey for a nice relaxing ride into Jerusalem. It might look hokey to folks like you and me, who expect a king to be in a chariot or a limousine or a Hummer that stretches three blocks long, but God delights in devising ways to save his children. So let the crowds shout "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!"

At some point you begin to ask yourself, "How far will this God go to devise a way to save his children? How far will this God go so that a people who are banished will not remain estranged from him?" You could almost begin to think that this God is willing to play the fool for his children. Showing up in a robe in the heat of the day, wrestling with Jacob, hiding out in a burning bush, judging beauty pageants, being born in mangers and swimming with sinners. It seems as if he is willing to do almost anything, to devise the most bizarre plan, just so that his children will not linger in banishment, but that the estrangement might be overcome.

Maybe a thousand years before the birth of Jesus, a woman said to King David, "God does not take away life; instead, he devises ways so that a banished person may not remain estranged from him." We believe that woman had tapped into the very heart

of the gospel story. And yet we also want to tell her, “You have no idea, dear woman. You have no idea the way God will devise to save his people.”

One day our God let an unruly mob play dress-up with him. They stripped him of his clothes and put a scarlet robe on him. They twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on his head. They put a staff in his right hand and knelt in front of him. Then they mocked him. “Hail, king of the Jews!” They spit on him, and took the staff and struck him on the head again and again. After they had mocked him, they took off the robe and put his own clothes on him. But they were not done. Not yet. Not by a long shot. Then they led him away to crucify him. (Matthew 27:27-31)

The strangest thing about this horrible scene is that this was part of the plan God had devised to save his people from being banished. The death of Jesus on the cross was a sacrifice of atonement. Some take atonement at its word, literally. *At one ment*. The banishment is ended. God came to seek and to save sinners, and his plan of salvation was to offer his life for ours, to take our sin upon himself and to give us his righteousness. For any who think God’s plan was thwarted by an angry mob, we do well to revisit a passage of scripture from the book of Isaiah. It is found in the 53rd chapter. Long before there was a manger or a stable or a cross or an empty tomb, or at least long before we humans had any idea about any of these things, God had already spoken a clear word about his servant who would suffer, and whose suffering would be the punishment that brought us peace. May our hearts be filled with awe and wonder for the God who would devise a way to save his children by sending his Son to be a suffering servant...for us.

Isaiah 53

1 Who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? 2 He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. 3 He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. 4 Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. 5 But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. 6 We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. 7 He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. ..10 Yet it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the LORD makes his life a guilt offering, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand. 11 After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light [of life] and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities. 12 Therefore I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong, because he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors. For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.