



From the Pulpit: February 19, 2023

Transfiguration of The Lord—Minute for Outreach—Communion

The Reverend Christine V. Hides

1 Samuel 28:3–25

The Unnamed, V: The Witch of Endor

We are in the midst of a sermon series called *The Unnamed*, about the many characters in the Bible who are important to the story but never get a name. Last week Bill preached about Pharaoh's daughter, who plucks Moses out of his little kayak, into the palace where he will grow up and later be called to lead his people to freedom. Today we are fast forwarding through 400 years and six books of the Bible to First Samuel. The descendants of the people who fled Egypt with Moses have until now, lived in a loose confederation of tribes led by judges. Saul is their first monarch, and as God warned through the prophet Samuel, things are not going well, trying to replace God with a human leader never does. In the twenty-eighth chapter we read:

Saul disguised himself. Then they set out, going to the woman at nighttime. "Please call up a ghost for me!" Saul said.

"Listen," she said to him, "Are you trying to get me killed? You know Saul has banned all mediums and diviners from the land."

But Saul promised "As surely as the Lord lives, you won't get into trouble. Bring up Samuel."

When the woman saw Samuel, she screamed at Saul, "Why have you tricked me? You are Saul!"

"Don't be afraid!" the king said to her. "What do you see?" The woman said to Saul, "I see a god coming up from the ground. He's wrapped in a robe."

Saul knew that it was Samuel, and he bowed low out of respect, nose to the ground. "Why have you disturbed me" Samuel asked Saul.

"I'm in deep trouble!" Saul replied. "The Philistines are at

war with me, and God has turned away from me and no longer answers me. So I have called on you to tell me what I should do."

"Why do you ask me," Samuel said, "The Lord has done

to you exactly what he spoke through me: The Lord has ripped the kingdom out of your hands and has given it to your friend David. The Lord has done this very thing to you today because you didn't listen to the Lord's voice. The Lord will now hand over both you and Israel to the Philistines. And come tomorrow, you and your sons will be with me!

Saul immediately fell on the ground, utterly terrified. He was weak because he hadn't eaten anything all day or night. The woman, seeing how scared he was, said, "Listen, I risked my life and did what you told me to do. Now it's your turn to listen to me, your servant. Let me give you a bit of food. Eat it, then you'll have the strength to go on your way."

She had a fattened calf in the house, and she quickly butchered it. She took flour, kneaded it, and baked unleavened bread.

She served this to Saul and his servants, and they ate.

“just like in ‘White Lotus’, we will encounter an assorted crew of weird, and often unlikeable characters making a total mess of what should be paradise.”

Have you watched *White Lotus*? In the opening scene of season one, we meet the unhappy newlywed Shane at the end of his honeymoon. He's at the airport gate watching a casket get loaded onto the flight home. The foreboding background music, I learned, is a variation on the *Dies Irae* which is a well-known chant translated, "day of wrath."

We get the same feeling in this passage from First Samuel when we are suddenly thrust to the tragic end of a story we don't know. And just like watching the next five episodes of *White Lotus*, we'll spend the rest of this

sermon trying to figure out what series of events and personalities got us to this dark place. And spoiler alert: just like in *White Lotus*, we will encounter an assorted crew of weird, and often unlikeable characters making a total mess of what should be paradise.

Hang in there with me and we'll find a word from God for today.

Like Shane, things are going horribly for King Saul, and much of it his own fault. There's an enormous army encamped on his doorstep, along with his archrival David who has joined up with the enemy. Saul's advisor and kingmaker, the judge, seer, priest, and prophet Samuel is dead. God has stopped taking Saul's calls. This king is desperate to know how the impending battle will turn out.

Having banned all the mediums and wizards, Saul now realizes he needs them and their knowledge. So he demands his servants find him a medium. And out on the edge of town, they know of a witch who works off the books, making her living mediating across the thin veil, that separates this life from the next.

Disguised Saul goes to the reluctant witch who raises the prophet Samuel from his eternal rest. The ticked off prophet tells Saul: David will be king, and Saul and his sons will die in the next battle.

In shock Saul lays there in the dirt until the medium forces him to eat some bread. Then in what scholars speculate might be a "quasi-priestly ritual" in a "banned religious subsystem"¹, the witch butchers her prize calf and feeds Saul and his men.

Cue the *Dies Irae*. Just how did we get here?

The first volume of Samuel is an epic tale of David's rise to power. If it reads like a piece of historical fiction that could inspire a binge worthy series like *Reign* or *Versailles*, that's because it is. In fact ABC tried to create just such a series called, "Of Kings and Prophets:

the Epic Story of a man destined to be king." It was pulled after two episodes because viewers balked at the violence and racy scenes. Others called it a *Game of Thrones* rip off. I didn't watch it, but I have read First Samuel, and it is epic and full of mature content.

Remember, the authors of Samuel are writing centuries after the fact, trying to make sense of two hundred years of suffering and foreign domination, first by the Assyrians, and then the Babylonians. They

don't agree on whether a monarchy is good or not, but they do agree that David is the one to take over Saul's failed regime.² They assemble the legends and stories into a multi-volume, best-selling tale organized around the idea that God's blessing results from obedience. Disobedience results in dire consequences. David is their hero. Saul's is thrown under the bus. But it's not that simple.

To put it another way, the authors would likely fail the analysis section of an AP History course, not because they made a claim, but because their argument is muddled, and they can't substantiate it with source material. **But** they would ace an AP Literature course because their attention to setting, plot, and character rivals Shakespeare.

Finding meaning in a complicated text requires the kind of higher order critical thinking and analysis skills taught in AP and college classes. We don't read this story to young children. But in fourth grade, after we have handed them their 3rd grade Bible which contains this and a lot more racy stuff, we teach them how to study it with attention to context, geography, and author.

Smart, reasonable people can and will reach different conclusions about the consequences of historical events and God's involvement in them. This is why some of you won't agree with me that God's word for today is a call to be like the Witch of Endor: Become an agent of God's mercy in an unfair world.

"God's word for today is a call to be like the Witch of Endor: Become an agent of God's mercy in an unfair world."

¹ Carol Newsom and Sharon Ringe (editors), *Women's Bible Commentary*, 158.

² See Rhonda Burkette-Bletsch, *Studying the Old Testament*, chapter 3 for further discussion on the Deuteronomists.

This text brings us up against the limits of our human intellect and points toward wisdom that lives on the margins and edges. Could it be that knowledge might one day be needed by the very people who, like Saul, banned it? Throughout history there have been people, many of them women like the medium at Endor, who possess a kind of wisdom or insight that puts them in conflict with the establishment.

Take Hildegard of Bingen for example, who experienced visions of God she called, “The Shade of Living Light” throughout her life. Among her many accomplishments, she was a medical writer and founder of two abbeys. She also composed chants, many of them good musical antidotes if the *Dies Irae* gets stuck in your head.³

St. Hildegard ran afoul of the religious authorities when she **refused** to dig up the body of a revolutionary from the abbey cemetery. In the cover of night she and the nuns disguised his grave. The angry church leaders responded by banning mass from her abbey. She replied that those who stand in the way of God’s praises will go, “to the place of no music,” in the next life. Eight hundred years after her death, in 2012, she was canonized by the Catholic church.

I once met a modern woman who, like the Witch of Endor, compassionately accompanies folks through the mysteries of their last days. Dr. Martha Jo Atkins collects and documents the visions of the dying: “the auditory, visual, and tactile experiences that often provide comfort.” She admits some say that these types of experiences are biological. Others say visions are proof of the soul’s life after death. Dr Atkins says, “neither side can prove their hypothesis, but my conjecture is this: It doesn’t matter.” Because she continues, these are opportunities to meet the dying person where they are. She’s an accomplished researcher who doesn’t try to quantify the practice of providing comfort to the dying.⁴

³ <http://www.hildegard-society.org/2014/07/o-virtus-sapientie-antiphon.html>

⁴ More to dying than meets the eye: Martha Atkins at TEDxSanAntonio 2013. Accessed Online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vg8WAv0YT9c>

In Saul’s case his near-death vision of Samuel is frightening. It is the Medium who provides comfort. As king, Saul holds the power of life and death over the witch. But she is not powerless. She’s been making her living undetected by authorities. She’s not afraid to tell a king who has just received a fatal diagnosis what to do: eat. Her compassion arrives in the form of a hastily prepared meal that enables Saul to face what lies ahead. God bless the hospice workers and chaplains of this world.

“She’s not afraid to tell a king who has just received a fatal diagnosis what to do”

And isn’t this just like God using the unexpected, the unsanctioned, and the underdog to bring a bit of mercy to this troubled world? Again and again throughout scripture, God adapts to the chaos and confusion humans create to try to lead us toward peace, even paradise.

The Witch of Endor is the only one who shows Saul any compassion. Don’t you feel a bit sorry for him? Afterall he’s just an ordinary guy from the smallest family in the lowest ranking tribe out looking for his father’s donkey when Samuel pours a bucket of oil on his head and says he will be Israel’s first king. He doesn’t have the stomach to wipe his enemy off the planet. Maybe if he had, the generations after him wouldn’t have had to endure the horrors of the Babylonians. We don’t know. What we do know is David will live in history as God’s chosen king, even though he will also prove to be far from perfect.

We look through a dark glass trying to find God in a messy narrative. (1 Corinth 13:12)

Let me tell you one more story about another woman who got into trouble with the powers that be, this time the religious ones. Several years ago one of the first woman priests in the Church of England, Reverend Lynda Klimas, installed a table and chairs for children in the 12th century chapel where she was rector. Maybe she knew her sermons were long for young ears, or maybe she knew parents could use a hand worshipping with kids. In any case, she provided a comfortable space to the youngest among them. Some in the congregation were so disgusted over the table, you would have thought she removed the cross from the chancel.

—The Great Prayer—
The Reverend Dr. William A. Evertsberg

A loud but unsuccessful few demanded her removal.

One year ago this week, in what would be the final months of her reign, Queen Elizabeth appointed the Rev. Klimas as Chaplain to the Sovereign. It is mostly an honorary role, but the chaplains agree to make themselves available should the monarch desire their wisdom in the form of a sermon.⁵ I don't know if she ever got to advise the queen face to face. But the church website indicates she is still serving the same parish where she offered a small mercy in the form of a child's table.⁶

Friends, we might tangle with powers that be. We will be present when someone receives bad news. We may walk with others in their final days. All of it is a part of God's epic story. And so, may we be led to act with compassion, using what God has entrusted us with.

Do you know what name tradition gave the Witch of Endor?Sedecla, a name that might just be connected to the Hebrew word for "righteous."⁷

⁵ <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/royal-family/2022/02/14/queen-appoints-vicar-threatened-sack-personal-chaplain/>

⁶ <https://www.stmarysmaulden.org/724514186382.htm>

⁷ [Leopold Cohn](https://www.jstor.org/stable/1450716), "An Apocryphal Work Ascribed to Philo of Alexandria," *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (Jan., 1898), pp. 277–332 (56 pages). Accessed online: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1450716>

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Holy God, Our loving Creator, close to us as breathing, and distant as the farthest star, we thank you for your constant love for all you have made.

We thank you for all that sustains life, for all people of faith in every generation who have given themselves to your will, and especially for Jesus Christ, whom you have sent from your own being as our Savior.

We praise you for Christ's birth, life, death, and resurrection, and for the calling forth of your church for its mission in the world.

Help us to be kind and caring neighbors to our friends who need your tender grace. We pray for our friends who suffer from ill health: heal their diseases. We pray for any here who are anxious over broken relationships; offer up your reconciliation. We pray for those who ache from guilt over past error: forgive their mistakes. We pray for those whose lives are hobbled by the darkness of depression; bring your light to their lives. We pray for those who feel imprisoned by addiction; break those chains with your strong and beautiful freedom.

We give thanks for the lives and witness of Bob Hoagland and Leo Harootyan, and we pray that you will bring resurrection hope to their families and friends. Receive them into the arms of your mercy, into the blessed rest of everlasting peace, and into the glorious company of the saints in light.

Gracious God, pour out your Holy Spirit upon us and upon these your gifts of bread and wine. Make them be for us the body and blood of Christ that we may be for the world the body of Christ, redeemed by his blood.

Through Christ, with Christ, in Christ, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honor are yours, Almighty God, forever and ever. Amen.