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1 Samuel 21:1-15 (compressed). NLT.

¹ David went to the town of Nob to see Ahimelech the priest. Ahimelech trembled when he saw him. “Why are you alone?” he asked.

² “The king has sent me on a private matter,” David said. ³ “Now, what is there to eat? Give me five loaves of bread or anything else you have.”

⁶ Since there was no other food available, the priest gave him the holy bread—the Bread of the Presence that was placed before the LORD in the Tabernacle.

⁸ David asked Ahimelech, “Do you have a spear or sword? The king’s business was so urgent that I didn’t even have time to grab a weapon!”

⁹ “I only have the sword of Goliath the Philistine, whom you killed in the valley of Elah,” the priest replied.

“There is nothing like it!” David replied. “Give it to me!”

¹⁰ So David escaped from Saul and went to King Achish of Gath. ¹¹ But the officers of Achish were unhappy about his being there. “Isn’t this David, the king of the land?” they asked. “Isn’t he the one the people honor with dances, singing,

‘Saul has killed his thousands,
and David his ten thousands?’”

¹² David heard these comments and was very afraid of what King Achish of Gath might do to him. ¹³ So he pretended to be insane, scratching on doors and drooling down his beard.

¹⁴ Finally, King Achish said to his men, “Must you bring me a madman? ¹⁵ We already have enough of them around here! Why should I let someone like this be my guest?”

Psalm 34:1-9. NLT

A psalm of David, regarding the time he pretended to be insane in front of Abimelech, who sent him away.

- ¹ *I will praise the LORD at all times.
I will constantly speak his praises.*
- ² *I will boast only in the LORD;
let all who are helpless take heart.*
- ³ *Come, let us tell of the LORD's greatness;
let us exalt his name together.*
- ⁴ *I prayed to the LORD, and he answered me.
He freed me from all my fears.*
- ⁵ *Those who look to him for help will be radiant with joy;
no shadow of shame will darken their faces.*
- ⁶ *In my desperation I prayed, and the LORD listened;
he saved me from all my troubles.*
- ⁷ *For the angel of the LORD is a guard;
he surrounds and defends all who fear him.*
- ⁸ *Taste and see that the LORD is good.
Oh, the joys of those who take refuge in him!*
- ⁹ *Fear the LORD, you his godly people,
for those who fear him will have all they need.*

Matthew 21:12-15 ESV (English Standard Version)

¹² *And Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who sold and bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons. ¹³ He said to them, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer,' but you make it a den of robbers."*

¹⁴ *And the blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he healed them. ¹⁵ But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the wonderful things that he did, and the children crying out in the temple, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" they were indignant.*

Earthly rescue.

Wendy and I have three kids. The past two weeks, I told stories about our son Julien, first showing the kids a picture of him playing the trumpet as a boy, and then last week, telling the story of him having a pork in his shoe. If you missed it,

you can download the PDF on my website. Today, I'd like to tell a story about another of our kids, our eldest, Martina. She has gone on to do great things with her life and her mind, but there was an incident that almost threatened all of that. One day, I was out biking with our two girls, Martina and Isabelle. I'm going to guess that Martina was eight. Martina was out front, with Isabelle behind her, and me taking up the rear. We were rolling along the cement bike path behind our house. At one point, Martina turned to look back at the two of us. As she did so, her front wheel went off the bike path and caught in the depression alongside the path. Her front wheel immediately came to a stop, tossing her head-first over her handlebars. The reason she wasn't seriously hurt is that she was wearing a bike helmet. She landed on her forehead and face, crushing in the bridge of the helmet over her eyebrows, and that helmet hung for many years in her room as a warning to all of us about the importance of bike helmets.

But she also broke her nose, flattening it and tearing it open vertically down the center. And, her two top front teeth, which were about halfway in, were knocked badly loose. Of course, I didn't know any of this in the instant after she hit the cement. I just saw her thud hard on the cement and didn't know if it was minor or serious. My immediate reaction, as I jammed on my brakes, was to fire off a quick prayer to God. *Please, God, let this end okay.* My heart was pounding

as I squatted down next to her. This story has a bit more to it, and I'll get back to that. The only other thing I wanted to say right now was how cool-headed Martina's kid sister Isabelle was. She pulled all our bikes off the path as I picked her sister up. I had a plan on where I was going to take Martina.

Let's look at our second reading for today. It's a Psalm. 117 of the 150 Psalms, like this one, have titles. Many people assume the titles were written by the authors of the Psalms, but this isn't true – and this sometimes ends up being significant when we study the Psalms. These titles are often called “historical”, but not “canonical”; in other words, they are ancient, but not part of the original Hebrew Scriptures. They show evidence of an editor at work. The titles tend to all have similar grammar and style, while the Psalms themselves vary in these regards. But the fact that they post-date the writing of the Psalms is very significant when studying the Psalm we're looking at today – because the title says: *A psalm of David, regarding the time he pretended to be insane in front of Abimelech, who sent him away.* First, David certainly did not write all the Psalms attributed to him in the Bible. More importantly, the reference to David acting insane is a very specific reference, and since it was added later and the Psalm does not actually reference this incident from Samuel 1, we might wonder if the original author of Psalm 34 actually had this incident in mind as he or she wrote.

The point is that in First Samuel, there is a passage, which we heard in our first Bible quote, where David pretends to be crazy in front of a king. Note that the King in First Samuel has a different name than the king in the title to Psalm 34, but this is considered to either be a typographical error on the part of the editor who added the title to the Psalm, or to reflect the fact that the name of the king in the Psalm title, King Abimelech, was a royal title, not actually a person's name. It is assumed that the kings mentioned in these two pieces of Scripture are indeed the same person. More importantly, here is a bit of history. King Saul, who was king before David, was very jealous of the popularity of the younger David. Seeing David as a rival, he decided to have him killed. So, David was fleeing Saul. He stopped off in Nob for some food and a weapon, and eventually slipped into neighboring Gath. But the King there, Achish, didn't like David being there and David grew afraid that the King would have him killed. So, to avoid that, David decided to pretend to be crazy, in particular, by drooling down his beard - something that I frequently do. The point is that the King was repulsed by David being mentally ill and simply sent him away.

Let's look at Psalm 34, which according to the person who gave this Psalm its title, has to do with this incident of David acting crazy. Listen to this:

⁶In my desperation I prayed, and the LORD listened;

*he saved me from all my troubles.
7 For the angel of the LORD is a guard;
he surrounds and defends all who fear him.*

Most likely, far too many of the Psalms are attributed to David, but the person who wrote 34 was indeed writing from David's perspective. Importantly, many scholars do believe David wrote this Psalm in particular, and in fact, that he wrote Psalms 3 to 41. What's funny, is that the Psalm thanks God for listening to his prayer and rescuing him, not for making the King believe his little ruse about being a madman. Isn't that what saved David? There are some who have criticized David for being downright cowardly in the way he acted before King Achish, and that maybe what is really going on in this Psalm is that David realized after the fact that he should have put his trust entirely in God and not tried to lie his way out of this situation. Maybe the Psalm is a bit of an admission that he was weak in this moment, and that he should have simply asked God to protect him.

My take is a little different. I think that if David really was thinking about this incident with the King when he wrote the Psalm, he figured that both he and God had done their parts. He had gone ahead and done his best to get himself out of the situation, but that he had also turned to God. In general, he's probably thanking God for listening to a prayer that protected him over a long series of events that resulted from him having to flee Saul. Just like Wendy and I did our

part and God did his part. We used precaution and put a helmet on Martina, and God answered my prayer that things wouldn't turn out too bad.

But there's more in this piece that I just pulled out of the Psalm. The part I quoted ends with:

*⁷ For the angel of the LORD is a guard;
he surrounds and defends all who fear him.*

What does this "fear" stuff mean? God protects those who *fear* him? There are many references to fear in the Old Testament. About four-fifths of them have God as their object. But although the word fear in Hebrew does indeed translate reasonably well to our word fear, the connotation is a bit different. The sense of fear in our Psalm is not fear in the immediate, literal sense, like being afraid of someone pointing a gun at you. It's more subtle. It refers to a spiritual disposition, to a fear that is mixed with awe. We fear things that overpower us emotionally or things that are mysterious. We can even fear something that we know will protect us. Old Testament fear is a pious fear. In the Old Testament, a key reason to be fearful of God is so that we remain aware of the presence of sin in our lives and in the world.

When it comes to the New Testament, fear plays a smaller role. But the Gospels do refer to the same notion of fear that we read about in the Old

Testament. In Luke, shepherds in the field are terrified by the appearance of angels. In Matthew, Mark, and John, the disciples are at sea in a storm and are freaked out, very afraid, when they see Jesus walking on the water. It's a fear formed from extreme awe. In Matthew 17, three of the Disciples, Peter, James, and John were high on a mountain with Jesus, when they saw him transformed into something that made his face shine like the sun and his clothes glow white. The disciples are said to be "terrified" – and they fall face first to the ground.

In contrast, I was full of basic, earthly fear when I carried Martina to the neighborhood dentist, a man named Dr. Levin, who worked on all three of our kids. He lived near us. He laid Martina out on his almost white carpet – which she bled all over – and with his young stepson assisting him, cleaned the blood out of Martina's nose and throat. He said that her nose was broken, but that kids' noses heal well, and she probably wouldn't even need surgery. He said that her front teeth were very loose, but that when teeth are coming in, they have a very significant blood supply, and so these teeth, unlike those belonging to an adult, would probably make it. He couldn't be sure, he said. She might need reconstructive surgery on her nose when she was fully grown, and she might indeed lose those teeth. This man, by the way, later died of cancer, and Wendy

and I visited him as he lay in that home, in that same room, taking his final breaths. By the way, Martina never needed surgery and she kept her front teeth. It was only later, after it seemed that Martina was okay, that biblical fear kicked in. I realized how vulnerable we are, how we often cannot protect our families. But God can – and this is what Old and New Testament fear is all about. We are in awe of the God who created the cosmos. We blend thankfulness and fear, just as David does in Psalm 34: we thank God for being the thing that we fear.

Now, this is Palm Sunday, and our third passage appears in Matthew, right after Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem on a donkey – which is the passage that is traditionally associated with Palm Sunday. In Chapter 21 Jesus first enters Jerusalem to the cries of the throng of people, and then Matthew explains to us why it is that the conflict between Jesus and the religious authorities of his time led to Jesus being crucified. Jesus drives out the corrupt money changers from the temple. He embarrasses rabbis who question his authority. Jesus then mocks the false faith of the leaders of the temple. But the real point is made in the last part of our third passage: ¹⁵ *But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the wonderful things that he did, and the children crying out in the temple, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" they were indignant.* The religious leaders of the day were jealous of the way the people turned to Jesus and shouted Hosanna to Jesus.

But do you know what Hosanna means? It's Hebrew and it translates literally to "Save now". In other words, Save *us* now. The crowd is looking for Jesus – not their religious leaders – to save them, to rescue them. They don't mean save us from sin or from an eternity separated from God. They mean save us now - on earth. Save us from the Romans who have conquered us. They think Jesus can rescue them, while their own chief priests and rabbis can do no such thing. We see that the followers of Jesus turned to him for protection, for rescue. They wanted him to get them out of a tough situation. They were in awe of him and so they thought he could bring them an earthly kingdom, which was, of course, very wrong.

This Palm Sunday, we should remember that yes, prayer is a good thing. It's perfectly fine and proper to turn to God, to Jesus, when we are in need. But Martina might have actually been seriously hurt when she flew off her bike. We do need to understand that sometimes, we don't get the earthly rescue we ask for – because often God knows that he has far more to offer us than what we can receive here on this earth. Sometimes we are even rescued here on earth, just in a different way than we requested. We don't understand the world the way God does – and so we are in awe of God. We celebrate our awe today – as Jesus begins that journey toward being crucified and then resurrected.