

Coram Deo  
Soli Deo Gloria, Soli Deo Gracia, Soli Scriptura  
Agnus Dei, Qui Tollis Peccata Mundi  
Deo Volente

Sermon Preach at Stouffville United Church

By the Rev. Dr. John S. Niles

# “Houston, We have a Problem”

*4<sup>th</sup> in the Series on David*

1 Samuel 19:1-24

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C3J1A09z0tA&t=62s>

Those famous words from Apollo 13 “Houston, we have a problem”. Speak not just to their situation but to our own. Though we can’t necessarily relate to being in outer space, we can relate to that experience when life is going along just great and then for no particular reason something starts to go wrong. And then we are in a fight for our lives.

Most little children when they start to sleep in their own room can tell you that the scariest place in the world is in your own home, in your own bed sometime after their parents have turned off the light and you are all alone in your room in the dark.

That is when the monsters come out. Its then that you hear the creeks the house makes that sound like weird voices, and the wind blowing the branches that scratch against their windows like fingernails trying their best to break in as they lay there eyes wide open with covers over their head forming in their child hood an impenetrable barrier to keep them out.

I remember explaining to each of my children at some point about the sounds, and how they make their imagination see and hear things that weren’t there. One night I took them outside, walking around the dark house, assuring me there were no monsters but still when I brought them back to their rooms to reassure them, I looked under their beds and in their closets demanding and ordering the monsters leave this instant or they would have to face me. At the time, it worked. And they would fall into a deep sleep. And that was all that was needed to make them feel safe.

It is only when you grow older that you learn that your room is not all that dangerous. Instead you discover that the whole world can be a dangerous place. You find out there are real monsters that fly airplanes into buildings, who kidnap kids from their families, who use and abuse people of all ages. Diseases and death strike when you least expect them, threatening to take away even the people we love the most. Whether it’s drunk driver, or an unseen germ, life is full of dangers, and hiding beneath the covers will not make them go away.

Those external giants can only be faced once we deal with our internal giants, as we learned last few weeks. And when one doesn’t they find themselves becoming like Saul, defensive, deceitful and destructive. Using what power one has not to make things better or safer, but scarier.

Have you ever noticed that some people are kind, polite, and sweet-spirited, until you try to sit in their pews?

While I was serving in my last parish; a new family came to church and sat close to the front. After sitting in the pew, a lady came up to them and said, “You are in my pew.” To which

the gentleman apologized and moved over to make room. She said, “You don’t understand. You are in my pew - move!”

The problem was; I was going on holidays the next week and the man and his family in the pew was a friend the Rev. Don Shields – the chaplain at Markham Stouffville Hospital who I had asked to take the service the next Sunday. Having not been there before, he came to see what the church was like. I never did ask what he preached on that next Sunday.

The problem with power -even if it is just over a pew - is that it doesn’t really matter what the person has power over – whether it is over a corporation because of being president or over a pew because of being a parishioner – it’s how the power is used.

One of the earliest lessons in David’s life was that power can be used or misused. David lived in the king’s house, married the king’s daughter and became the king’s son-in-law, but he saw first-hand the corruption of power. Power can change lives and affect people. Power in the right hands can nurture a Churchill, but in the wrong hands will birth to a Hitler or Putin.

## I

We have a problem when power does **more harm than good**. *“Jonathan spoke well of David to Saul his father and said to him, “Let not the king do wrong to his servant David; he has not wronged you, and what he has done has benefited you greatly. 5 He took his life in his hands when he killed the Philistine. The LORD won a great victory for all Israel, and you saw it and were glad. Why then would you do wrong to an innocent man like David by killing him for no reason?” 6 Saul listened to Jonathan and took this oath: “As surely as the LORD lives, David will not be put to death.” 7 So Jonathan called David and told him the whole conversation. He brought him to Saul, and David was with Saul as before. 8 Once more war broke out, and David went out and fought the Philistines. He struck them with such force that they fled before him. 9 But an evil spirit from the LORD came upon Saul as he was sitting in his house with his spear in his hand. While David was playing the harp, 10 Saul tried to pin him to the wall with his spear, but David eluded him as Saul drove the spear into the wall. That night David made good his escape”.* (1 Sam 19:4-10)

Saul put a “wanted” posture out for David and a price on his head. He just couldn’t let go; even though he knew that it would do more harm than good.

There is something within us all that screams out about this type injustice, when evil is returned instead of good.

Saul was trapped in a cycle of destruction because he wouldn’t deal with his anxieties, insecurities and jealousies.

In Africa, there is a tribe of hunters that have a clever way of trapping monkeys. They slice a coconut in two, hollow it out, and in one half of the shell cut a hole just big enough for a monkey’s hand to pass through. Then they place an orange in the other coconut half before fastening together the two halves of the coconut shell. Finally, they secure the coconut to a tree with a rope, retreat into the jungle, and wait. Sooner or later, an unsuspecting monkey swings by, smells the delicious orange, and discovers its location inside the coconut. The monkey then slips his hand through the small hole, grasp the orange, and tries to pull it through the hole. Of course, the orange won’t come out; it’s too big for the hole. To no avail the persistent monkey continues to pull and pull, never realizing the danger he is in. While the monkey struggles with the orange, the hunters simply stroll in and capture the monkey by throwing a net over him. As long as the

monkey keeps his fist wrapped around the orange, the monkey is trapped. It's too bad-the poor monkey could save its own life if it would let go of the orange. It rarely occurs to a monkey, however, that it can't have both the orange and its freedom.

In the same way, sometimes what we think we want is in fact the very thing that is holding us back, or keeping us captive.

Saul was both destructive and self-destructive. And David was forced to deal with the consequences.

Now, that doesn't seem fair, David has to deal with the fall out of someone else's bad decisions, after all he had done was for Saul's benefit.

We see that David hadn't done anything wrong! Yet, Saul wanted him dead. Jonathan's speech seems to change his dad's mind for a moment. Saul and David reconcile and all seems well, until Saul has another one of his jealous fits, and once again David has to run for his life.

David's innocence does not deliver him from danger. Innocence will not always deliver us from danger, either. And that is where we want to scream to the rooftops "that is wrong." Or "that is not fair!"

My children, still remind me when they all get together, how when something would happen and they got in trouble, and had to face the consequence they would scream, "That's not fair!" And I would always respond, you are right. It's not fair. But it is life. Now suck it up and deal with it.

Many of us have the idea that really bad things only happen to really bad people. But that is not always true. Though ordinary folk like us do our best to steer clear of danger as much as possible. We figure the farther away from trouble we live, the harder it is for danger to find us. We play by the rules, try to treat other people right, live and let live, and by doing all of this, we hope to stay safe and sound in a dangerous world.

Does that really work? Well, yes and no. Nobody would deny that living a good moral life will keep you out of trouble. Living right keeps you away from many dangers that come with doing wrong. At the same time, doing right does not guarantee deliverance from all danger. The Bible tells us that even the righteous can expect this world to be a dangerous place:

Ps 34:19 Many are the afflictions of the righteous...

John 16:33...in the world, you will have tribulation...

It's not fair, but it is life. Though we need to remember when we are forced, like David to deal with life's undeserved trials, that we are not alone in this. As believers, we have each other and we have Him.

## II

We have a problem when power does more harm than good and when it creates more **hurt then healing**.

*11 Saul sent men to David's house to watch it and to kill him in the morning. But Michal, David's wife, warned him, "If you don't run for your life tonight, tomorrow you'll be killed." 12 So Michal let David down through a window, and he fled and escaped. 13 Then Michal took an*

*idol and laid it on the bed, covering it with a garment and putting some goats' hair at the head. 14 When Saul sent the men to capture David, Michal said, "He is ill." 15 Then Saul sent the men back to see David and told them, "Bring him up to me in his bed so that I may kill him." 16 But when the men entered, there was the idol in the bed, and at the head was some goats' hair. 17 Saul said to Michal, "Why did you deceive me like this and send my enemy away so that he escaped?" Michal told him, "He said to me, 'Let me get away. Why should I kill you?'" (1 Sam 19:11-17)*

For David, leaving meant leaving behind a sick king who he had been loyal to, his loving wife, his best friend and his fellow soldiers who trusted his leadership.

An English proverb says, "When elephants fight, it's the grass that suffers." David didn't want anyone else to suffer because of what had gone wrong with King Saul.

A big city lawyer went duck hunting in the countryside. He shot and dropped a bird, but it fell into a farmer's field on the other side of a fence. As the lawyer climbed over the fence, an elderly farmer drove up on his tractor and asked him what he was doing.

The litigator responded, "I shot a duck and it fell in this field, and now I'm going to retrieve it." The old farmer replied, "This is my property, and you are not coming over here."

The indignant lawyer said, "I am one of the best trial attorneys in the country and if you don't let me get that duck, I'll sue you and take everything you own." The old farmer smiled and said, "Apparently, you don't know how we settle disputes here. We settle small disagreements like this with the 'Three Kick Rule.'"

The lawyer asked, "What is the 'Three Kick Rule?'" The farmer replied, "Well, because the dispute occurs on my land, first I kick you three times and then you kick me three times and so on back and forth until someone gives up."

The attorney quickly thought about the proposed contest and decided that he could easily take the old codger. He agreed to abide by the local custom. The old farmer slowly climbed down from the tractor and walked up to the attorney. His first kick planted the toe of his heavy steel toed work boot into the lawyer's groin and dropped him to his knees. His second kick to the midriff sent the lawyer's last meal gushing from his mouth. The lawyer was on all fours when the farmer's third kick to his rear end sent him face-first into a fresh cow pie.

The lawyer summoned every bit of his will and managed to get onto feet. Wiping his face with the arm of his jacket, he said, "Okay, you old coot. Now it's my turn." The old farmer smiled and said, "Naw, I give up. You can have the duck."

David did not want to stoop to the king's level. David, chose to leave rather than fight Saul's men who were merely following orders.

John 15:13 Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends.

Years ago, a young mother was making her way across the hills of South Wales, carrying her tiny baby in her arms, when she was overtaken by a blinding blizzard. She never reached her destination but when the blizzard subsided her body was found by searchers, who discovered that before her death, she had taken off all her outer clothing and wrapped it about her baby. When they unwrapped the child, to their great surprise and joy, they found he was alive and well. She had wrapped her body around her son's given her life for her child, proving the depths of her mother love. Years later that child, David Lloyd George, became prime minister of Great Britain, and, without a doubt, one of England's greatest statesmen.

I have no doubt that every mother and father in this room would do the same thing for their own child to save their lives but at the same time, let's be honest: love does not always make us safe and sound in this dangerous world. But it does make it easier to bear.

Even after David escapes, Saul continues to pursue him, continues to try and kill him. Michal's love for her husband saved him from death that night,

### III

We have a problem when power does more harm than good and when creates more hurt than healing. And when there is more **hostility then honour**,

*“18 When David had fled and made his escape, he went to Samuel at Ramah and told him all that Saul had done to him. Then he and Samuel went to Naioth and stayed there. 19 Word came to Saul: “David is in Naioth at Ramah”; 20 so he sent men to capture him. But when they saw a group of prophets prophesying, with Samuel standing there as their leader, the Spirit of God came upon Saul’s men and they also prophesied. 21 Saul was told about it, and he sent more men, and they prophesied too. Saul sent men a third time, and they also prophesied. 22 Finally, he himself left for Ramah and went to the great cistern at Secu. And he asked, “Where are Samuel and David?” “Over in Naioth at Ramah,” they said. 23 So Saul went to Naioth at Ramah. But the Spirit of God came even upon him, and he walked along prophesying until he came to Naioth. 24 He stripped off his robes and also prophesied in Samuel’s presence. He lay that way all that day and night. This is why people say, “Is Saul also among the prophets?” (1 Sam 19:18-24)*

Because Saul refused to deal with his insecurities, anxieties, jealousy it gave birth to a hatred for David he couldn't let go of.

He would set trap after trap, send servant after servant, and still refused use his power for good instead of evil. The main point here is that when David is cornered, with no way out, it is not his innocence nor the love of someone else who delivers him- it is God. When there is no way out, God delivers

No matter what position we have or have had in life, a measure of power and influence for good or ill goes along with it.

Teddy Stallard was an unattractive and unmotivated fifth grade boy. His teacher, Mrs. Thompson found him difficult to like due to his deadpan, expressionless, unfocused stare. She had to admit that down deep inside she took pleasure in marking his papers with red ink and making an F with a special flair. As a teacher she had access to his records and sought to know more about him. 1st Grade: Teddy shows promise with his work and attitude but has a poor home situation. 2nd Grade: Teddy could do better. Mother is seriously ill and he receives little help at home. 3rd Grade: Teddy is a good boy but too serious. Slow learner. His mother died this year. 4th Grade: Teddy is very slow but well behaved. Father shows no interest. At Christmas the children in Mrs. Thompson's class brought her presents in pretty wrappings. When she got to Teddy's it was crudely wrapped in brown paper and loosely held together with tape. She opened it to find a bracelet with stones missing and a bottle of cheap perfume. Some of the children snickered but trying to be nice she slipped on the bracelet and even some perfume saying, 'Doesn't it smell lovely?' When school was over Teddy lingered behind and came to her desk, 'Miss Thompson, you smell just like my mother, and her bracelet looks real pretty on you too. I'm glad you liked my presents'. That night she went home and asked God to forgive her for how she had treated that little boy. Next day, her class welcomed a new teacher. Miss Thompson was no longer just a teacher but an agent of God. She committed herself to loving her children and especially Teddy Stallard. Teddy began to show dramatic improvement and by the end of the

year had caught up with most of the other students. She did not hear from Teddy for a long time until one day she received a note: 'Dear Miss Thompson. I wanted you to know that I will be graduating second in my high school class' Love Teddy Stallard. Four years later: 'Dear Miss Thompson: They just told me I would be graduating first in my class. I wanted you to be the first to know. The university has not been easy but I liked it. Love, Teddy Stallard. Finally: Dear Miss Thompson: As of today I am Theodore Stallard, MD. How about that? I wanted you to be the first to know. I am getting married next month. I want you to come and sit where my mother would have sat if she were alive. You are my only family. Dad died last year. Love, Teddy Stallard. She went to the wedding and in Teddy's eyes she had earned the right to sit in a special place because as an agent of God's love she had done something for Teddy that he could never forget. She had exercised the power of God's love.

When the power of love overcomes the love of power; it is only then we will experience peace. You think about that. Amen.