

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
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July 22, 2018
16th Sunday in Ordinary Time
2 Samuel 7:1-17

A House Made By God

We've been spending some time this summer with the Bible's stories of the establishment of ancient Israel, around 3000 years ago, as something more than a loose confederation of tribes governed by a series of judges. The people wanted to be a nation, like others around them, with a king. Saul was chosen to be king at first, and the emerging nation battled against the Philistines. Then David rose as an alternative to Saul, and he was successful in war. All of Saul's potential heirs to the throne were eliminated, and David was established as king.

Today we reach the point in the story when David has a moment to rest, reflect, and consider what lies ahead with the help of the Lord's prophet, Nathan.

[read 2 Samuel 7:1-17]

Well now, it all sounds great, doesn't it? The course of history is set. The chosen king David and his descendants will rule God's chosen people in the promised land FOREVER. The people have become a nation like others, with a king. By the next generation they will have a temple for their God to live in, just as other peoples do. And ever after, nothing will shake this dynasty or this temple. Nothing. Because God makes promises, and God is faithful, and God keeps promises.

If there is one unifying theme in the Hebrew Bible, what we commonly call the Old Testament, it is the theme of Covenant. God made a covenant with Noah, that never again would a flood destroy all life on earth. God made a covenant with Abraham and Sarah, that their descendants would be as numerous as the stars and would live in a land God would give them, that God would be their God and they would be God's people. God expanded this covenant with the people in the time of Moses, giving them a law for living together in the land. And in today's reading. God makes a covenant through David, that David's family will always rule this people and this "forever" land.

So let's review the fulfillment of these promises. As far as I know, there have been no historic floods which destroyed all life. (check) The descendants of Abraham and Sarah have continued to multiply and be loyal to God. (check) The Law given through Moses still stands, through many centuries. (check) And astoundingly enough, most of the world still recognizes the spiritual tie to the land held by descendants of the Hebrew people, the Jews. (check) So far, so good. But this promise to David? Did God make an unkeepable promise? And if so, why did the editors of sacred scripture, centuries later, keep this overreaching language in the Bible?

Yes, David's son Solomon would succeed to the throne and build a temple for God in Jerusalem. But just a generation later, David's grandsons, Solomon's sons, couldn't hold the nation together and it divided, north and south. A few hundred years later, the dynasty completely collapsed when the Babylonians invaded and the temple was destroyed. So much for an everlasting house and an eternal dynasty! The history seems to put these words in the category of what courtiers always tell their kings. "You are the greatest, you are divinely blessed, and your house will last forever."

Or as the Rev. Shawnthea Monroe writes of the praises echoed in Psalm 89,

This section . . . reads like a campaign commercial for King David. “King David! His line shall continue forever, and his throne endure before me like the sun! It shall be established forever like the moon, an enduring witness in the skies! I am YHWH and I approve this message.” (*Feasting on the Word*, Proper 11 alternative commentary, 2012, Westminster John Knox Press, p. 7)

Sycophantic underlings and political hyperbole haven’t gone away, and neither have nations with aspirations of everlasting greatness and eternal divine blessing. America has been a nation for more than 240 years, and we have thought of ourselves as divinely blessed. Some call it “American exceptionalism.” But nations come and go on the earth, empires rise and fall, and no earthly houses have ever reigned forever. Prophetic voices remind us now, as they did then, of the responsibilities of living within a covenant. To quote from some great modern literature, “With great power comes great responsibility.” (That’s from Uncle Ben in *Spiderman*, in case you didn’t recognize it.) Or as God quietly but firmly warns, “When [the king] commits iniquity, I will punish him.” (2 Sam 7:14)

And yet. Scholars tell us that the scripture we know as First and Second Samuel did not take its final form until the period known as the Exile, in the 6th century B.C.E., when the failure of the monarchy was felt in its fullness. Psalm 89 was probably written in the Exile. Why did they continue to praise David and his dynasty, when they knew it didn’t last forever?

And what are these words saying to us today, who know the history? We, who are bombarded with political speech daily, who have become cynical about the motives of all political leaders, yet at the same time still hunger for a politician who will speak the truth? We’re not even so sure what truth is anymore. You have your facts and I have my facts, your sources and my sources. Is there room in our discourse for an ideal, a vision to which we can all aspire?

It is this yearning for a vision beyond a disheartening reality which explains why the promise to David and his house wasn’t conveniently forgotten in the Exile, why instead, it was elevated. Just as we clamor for those still able to articulate our nation’s ideals of liberty and justice for all, just as we put our cynical despair on hold when we remember our heroes and heroines who courageously lived the dream, just as we hope for a new commitment to one nation under God, the people of the Exile hearkened to the vision of God’s covenant with the house of David. When things are bleak, we look for hope. Francis Bellamy was a Christian socialist in the 1890s. He wrote the Pledge of Allegiance because he was concerned about “the rampant greed of the robber barons, the gilded age, the exploitation of immigrants, and the sweat shops, slums, and racism,” and he believed “the country could do better.” (Quote from Peter Dreier, professor of politics at Occidental College, in “The Politics of Patriotism,” *Christian Science Monitor Weekly*, Jul 9 & 16, 2018, p. 29) In the troubled present, reflection on the ideals of the past can give hope for a better future.

And in a troubled present, we still need to be reminded that though human houses and human kings, human plans and human aspirations will fail, God remains faithful. In our experience of exile, we need to hear again that God’s steadfast love endures forever, and God’s faithfulness is to all generations. In our tendency to despair, our inability to see a better future, our loss of confidence in human institutions and worldly ways, we need reason to hope.

And that, my friends, is why we are here today. We could have slept in. We could have gone out for brunch. We could have gone on a hike or to the lake or retreated to the mountains but instead we did the ridiculously counter-cultural, outdated thing and came to church to be with others who, like us, want to believe in something beyond ourselves, something beyond our immediate circumstances,

something beyond the anomie of our culture. We are here because we need a reason to hope, something to live for, a vision of a future better than today.

The Biblical writers were fully aware that David was no paragon of virtue, and that his descendants would fail miserably at living up to even his mixed standard. Yet his house became a symbol, not of human greatness, but of God's faithfulness. "I'll build a house for you," says David to God. "No, I'm the one who builds houses," says God, "and I will build your house, your family, as a sign of my sovereignty and goodness."

"And furthermore," adds God, "I will dwell among you. I will live in the house I make among you. And you will live in the house I make, a house made of wisdom and justice and righteousness which rules forever."

Oh, now we're talking about something beyond 961 B.C.E. Now we're talking about more than a building made of bricks and mortar. Now we're talking about more than a succession of human kings. Now we're talking about the sovereignty of God, the kingdom of God, the reconciliation of the world, and the message of Jesus Christ. We're talking about the fulfillment of all God's promises!

This is the story we need to hear, the story which includes us as it reminds us of God's faithfulness and power and love for us.

This is the word which the prophet Isaiah spoke when he offered his prophecy of hope: "A shoot will come from the stump of Jesse," (Is 11:1), for Jesse was the father of David.

This is the promise Jeremiah raised when he said, "The days are surely coming when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch. . . . (Jer 23:5)

This is the reason we pay attention to Luke on Christmas Eve when we hear "In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus. . . . and Joseph also went to the city of Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David." (Luke 2:1, 4) We know something wonderful is coming, because we remember God's promise.

And this is the culmination of Jesus' message in Revelation, his final words, when he says "I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star." (Rev. 22:16)

This is our story, in which God makes a home for us all, all the earth and all its inhabitants, a home of peace and joy and love.

And Christ, the sovereign more faithful and true and good than any of the human kings of ancient Israel, including his ancestor David, reigns forever in the house God makes. Christ our Savior is our Lord, the bright morning star of our hope and the fulfillment of God's eternal promise. Christ is King forever. For God has promised, and God is faithful.

My friends, take this hope home with you today. It is not vested in human leaders or institutions, not in a nation or its heroes, not in material wealth or human ingenuity. Our hope is built on nothing less than God's promise, which we see fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Our hope is built on God's faithfulness, which we experience as the steadfast love upholding the universe. Our hope is built on God's everlasting word, which speaks in our time and place to show us eternity.

Blessed be the Lord forever. Amen and Amen.