

## THE DISAPPEARING “IF”

II Samuel 7:1-11, 16

*A sermon given by Dr. Larry R. Hayward on the Fourth Sunday of Advent, December 21, 2008, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia*

### Focus Text

*Now when the king was settled in his house, and the LORD had given him rest from all his enemies around him, the king said to the prophet Nathan, ‘See now, I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent.’ Nathan said to the king, ‘Go, do all that you have in mind; for the LORD is with you.’*

*But that same night the word of the LORD came to Nathan: Go and tell my servant David: Thus says the LORD: Are you the one to build me a house to live in? I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle. Wherever I have moved about among all the people of Israel, did I ever speak a word with any of the tribal leaders of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, ‘Why have you not built me a house of cedar?’ Now therefore thus you shall say to my servant David: Thus says the LORD of hosts: I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep to be prince over my people Israel; and I have been with you wherever you went, and have cut off all your enemies from before you; and I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may live in their own place, and be disturbed no more; and evildoers shall afflict them no more, as formerly, from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel; and I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover, the LORD declares to you that the LORD will make you a house....*

*Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure for ever before me; your throne shall be established for ever.*

One of the great Presbyterian ministers of the last century was Dr. Elam Davies, who led Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago from 1962 to 1984. According to a scholar who recently studied his ministry, Davies focused in his preaching on the unconditional love of God for every human being.

The author writes:

    In sermon after sermon, Davies proclaimed the radical, inclusive, sacrificial, embracing love of God for humanity. He had the ability to preach this good news not only in the abstract but also in the particular. It was not uncommon for worshipers in the pews to feel personally embraced by Jesus and his love.<sup>1</sup>

I never heard Elam Davies preach, but I did once hear a person, fresh from a funeral he had lead, say: “The prayer he gave was so beautiful it made me wish I was the one who had died.”

\*\*

We Christians sometimes think the unconditional love of God was invented 2000 years ago with the birth of Jesus Christ.

- To be sure, while in the Old Testament God’s covenant with Noah after the Flood promises that God will never again destroy the earth by means of water,<sup>2</sup>
- and the Old Testament promise to Abraham and Sarah of land, descendants, and blessing seems rather unconditional and open-ended,<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Deborah J. Kapp, *Worship Frames: How We Shape and Interpret Our Experience of God* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2008), 68.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 9.

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 12.

the unconditional character of these covenants is undermined by one of the most famous covenants in the Old Testament: that between God and Moses.

Having delivered the people of Israel from slavery to freedom, preparing them to enter the Promised Land, God says to his people:

You have seen what I did to the Egyptians,  
And how I bore you on eagles' wings  
and brought you to myself.  
Now therefore, *if* you obey my voice  
and keep my covenant,  
you shall be my treasured possession...  
You shall be for me a priestly kingdom  
and a holy nation...<sup>4</sup>

The whole promise to God's people through Moses seems to hinge this one word: "If..." "*If* you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession." A long way we are from the *unconditional* love of God.

\*\*

Fast forward several hundred years. The people of Israel have wandered in the wilderness, entered the Promised Land, won some battles, lost others, secured one king, Saul, only to see him rejected by God, and now are led by a second king David. Under David, the people of Israel are at the height of their military supremacy and their political stability.

Through an intermediary named Nathan, the Lord speaks to David about David's kingship, its future, and the conditions of the people of Israel to whom they are both committed. The Lord says to David:

When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body...

*I will establish the throne of [your offspring's] kingdom forever....*

When he commits iniquity, I will punish him with a rod such as mortals use, with blows inflicted by human beings.

*But I will not take my steadfast love from him...your throne shall be established forever.*

Just as in God's previous "conditional" command to Moses the two-letter word "if" looms large, in this "unconditional" promise to David, the three-letter word "but" speaks volumes.

When [your offspring] commits iniquity, I will punish him with...blows inflicted by human beings.

*But I will not take my steadfast love from him...*

The unconditional love of God rings loudly and clearly through this Old Testament promise to David.

\*\*

Fast-forward still another thousand years, to an angel, named Gabriel, sent by God to a virgin engaged to a man whose name is Joseph.

Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.

*And now*, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.

He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High,

---

<sup>4</sup> Exodus 19:4-6.

And the Lord God will give *him* the throne of his ancestor David.

He will reign over the house of Jacob *forever*, and of *his* kingdom there will be *no end*.<sup>5</sup>

In the 300 years from Moses to David, we travelled from “if” to “but.” In the thousand years from David to Christ, we travelled from “but” to “and now.”

*And now* you will...bear a son,  
*And [now]* you will name him Jesus...  
*And [now]* of his kingdom there will be no end.

From Moses to David to Christ, from “if” to “but” to “and now” The unconditional love of God proclaimed by the great Chicago preacher reigns in this room and in our world as we celebrate the birth of Christ.

\*\*

I know what I have said implies a linear development on the part of our religion.

- What I have said may imply that the God of the Old Testament conveys love that is *conditional*, while for the God of the New Testament love is *unconditional*.
- What I have said may lead to the conclusion that Judaism is based on conditional love while Christianity is based on unconditional love.

But such limiting of unconditional love to Jesus Christ is far from accurate.

Remember: the passage before us today – containing the promise to David – is an *Old Testament* promise on the part of God for *unconditional* love. Unconditional love is the first and last word spoken by God in both testaments. It is the word that becomes flesh and dwells among us in Christ.<sup>6</sup>

\*\*

So how do we appropriate this love?

Some of us in this room are so filled with a sense of responsibility for – and worry about – the future that it is hard for us to believe in the unconditional love of God.

- We feel guilty because we have had a run of prosperity that either we or people and forces larger than us have blown.
- We are worried about the economic and environmental legacy we are leaving the beautiful children baptized in our church, born or adopted into our home.
- We worry about whether we can ever again even think of helping people beyond our own family, people for whom our worries seem trivial because of the conditions in which they live in our community and around the world.

In our anxiety, all we hear is the “if”: “If you have blown it, you are going to suffer blows.” But even when the “if” rises to the level of a shout, the “but” and “now” chime in. The unconditional love of God has become flesh in the birth and life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Become flesh...*now*.

~

Some of us have backgrounds and upbringings in which the only experiences of love we have ever known are based upon an “if.”

The subtle or not-so-subtle message from our past, sometimes expressed with a velvet glove, sometimes with a coldness of the shoulder, a slap to the face, a pinch to the ear: “If you will obey my voice and do [or be] as I command, you will be my treasured possession. But if you don’t, you won’t.”

Perhaps this “if” came not just through those who reared us, but also through

- The voice of a judgmental preacher
- The stare of a priest or nun

---

<sup>5</sup> Luke 1:31-33.

<sup>6</sup> John 1:1-4.

- The gap we noticed as a child between what church people said and sang and what they did.

As strongly as the “if” has shaped our identity, as intensely as it re-emerges in the hardness of throat we experience in the presence of certain people or certain places, that “if” has been subsumed by a “but” and by a “now.” “The unconditional love of God has become flesh and dwelt among us.” Christ is who we have “now.”

~

For some of us, it is not so much the “if” God puts on us as the “if” we put on God. The Holy One is not the only one capable of writing “if” in calligraphy.

Some of us may be placing conditions on God because we are mad.

- Mad at things that have been happened this year
- Mad that someone has been suddenly and irretrievably taken from us
- Mad that our marriage has failed
- Mad that a blossoming relationship has suddenly become hopeless and future-less
- Mad that pregnancy hasn’t come
- Mad that pregnancy came and went before we could even share the joy of its news

“If Thou had not brought such visitations,” we pray to God, “then Thou would receive my love; but Thou has not obeyed my voice; therefore, I shall not treasure Thee.”

To the anger we feel – deep, legitimate, based in real events and real issues – the unconditional love of God can break through to us through “Immanuel,” the “God-with-ness” of the birth of Christ. In every loss, in every pain, in every tragedy, in every event that gives rise to anger, the unconditional love of God is with us, “and now.”

For we have not a high priest  
 Who is unable to sympathize with our weakness,  
 But one who in every way has been tested as we are,  
 Yet without sin.  
 Let us therefore approach the throne of grace  
 With boldness,  
 So that we may receive mercy and find grace to help  
 In time of need.<sup>7</sup>

\*\*

When Elam Davies preached the unconditional love of God, he expected his congregation to act on it.

“Love one another as God has loved you,” he would say. “Reach out to people in the immediate neighborhood and surrounding communities. Engage in ministries of compassion. Bring into your life, and bring life to, the least, the last, and the lost.”<sup>8</sup>

Because we have moved from “if” to “but” and “now,” we can act:

- For those close to us
- For those far away
- For those whose need is greater than ours
- For those whose need is less than ours.

And in our acting there is healing.

The “if” has disappeared,  
 subsumed in the “but” and the “now”  
 of the birth and life,  
 death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.  
 Thanks be to God.  
 Amen.

<sup>7</sup> Hebrews 4:15-16.

<sup>8</sup> Kapp 68. According to Kapp, Davies coined this latter phrase.