

THE GOVERNOR-GENERAL'S MANSION

II Samuel 7:1-17

A sermon given by Dr. Larry R. Hayward on December 18, 2011, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia, on the Fourth Sunday of Advent.

Focus Passage

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. 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, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom for ever.

I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me. 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, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you.

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

In accordance with all these words and with all this vision, Nathan spoke to David.

Let us pray: *Lord God, as we journey into the past and see both flaws and promises to King David, help us journey into honest assessment of ourselves and our time, that we might be moved to confession and trust that the promise of unconditional love and everlasting dominion to David has indeed arrived in Jesus Christ, and that in him we have the hope and power to live fully in our time. In Christ's name we pray: Amen.*

It had been quite a ride and rise for King David.

- He had successfully outwitted and out-waited his declining predecessor Saul, who had just died in battle along with his Saul's son Jonathan, leaving David an unimpeded path to the throne.¹
- David had managed to display appropriate public grief for Saul and Jonathan and to lead the people in their mourning.²
- He had vanquished, once and for all, the Philistines,³ who had been his enemy since the early, heady days when he had slain Goliath, one of their number.⁴
- David had now been declared king by both Israel and Judah, uniting the people of God for the first time in decades.⁵

¹ I Samuel 31.

² II Samuel 1.

³ II Samuel 5:17-25.

⁴ I Samuel 17.

⁵ II Samuel 5:1-5.

- He had captured the previously-thought-impregnable city of Jerusalem, declared it the nation's capital,⁶ restored the Ark of the Covenant to within its borders.⁷
- In returning the Ark to Jerusalem, David had danced before the Lord but he had also danced before maidens of the city – an action which wounded and alienated his wife Michal and led to an estrangement between them so deep and permanent that they bore no children and therefore no heir to succeed David as King.⁸ Nonetheless, at this point in his life, David's rise to power has been so meteoric that thoughts of his own mortality are far from his mind.

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From his perch of power, David thinks it just might be time to return some favor to God.

See now, I am living in a house of cedar [David says to the prophet Nathan], but the ark of God stays in a tent.

As if to know what David is thinking before the words form on David's lips, Nathan says:

Go, do all that you have in mind; for the LORD is with you.
 "Do all that you have in mind, for the Lord is with you" – a dangerous word for one in power to hear, a dangerous word for any of us to hear.

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That same night, it is the word of the Lord – rather than warm feelings generated by proximity to power – that comes to Nathan, leading him to reverse his prior blessing of David's idea. Said God 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... but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle.

As if the Lord neither needed a house nor could be contained within one, David soon learns that instead of *him* building the Lord a house *the Lord* will in fact build David a house.

When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors [the Lord says to David], I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your

⁶ II Samuel 5:6-15.

⁷ II Samuel 6.1-15.

⁸ II Samuel 6:16-23.

body, and I will establish [your offspring's] kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom for ever.

God then breaks out into language of covenant that Israel remembers from earlier days:

I will be a father to [your offspring], and he shall be a son to me. When he commits iniquity, I will punish him with a rod such as mortals use, with blows inflicted by human beings.

But to this *conditional*, covenantal language,⁹ -- the language of “if” and “then” -- God adds an *unconditional* promise:

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

Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure for ever...

Your throne shall be established for ever.

This promise leads David to prayer,¹⁰ a prayer that on the surface seems sincere and grateful. But David's gratitude will be short-lived:

- It is not too long before David will commit the most heinous crime of his life and reign: violating Bathsheba and arranging the death of her husband, one of David's commanders.¹¹
- It is not too long before division, violence and death will become part of David's family and part of David's kingdom.¹²
- It is not too long before David will never be the same again, and Israel will never be more in need of the hope and assurance that God's promises will indeed outlast David's *flawed* personality, that God's blessings will indeed outlast David's *flawed* rule, that God's providence and protection will indeed outlast David's *flawed* life, personal and professional.

The unconditional promise of an everlasting kingdom is exactly what God's people will soon need to hear.

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Even though he was Jewish, the late Russian poet Joseph Brodsky (1940-1996) loved Christmas. He was determined to write a poem each Christmas, though several years spent in a Soviet prison camp prevented him from fully honoring this determination.

⁹ For a beautiful example of the conditional language of covenant, see Deuteronomy 30:15-20.

¹⁰ II Samuel 7:18-29.

¹¹ II Samuel 11.

¹² II Samuel 12-I Kings 2:12.

Still for many Christmases, Brodsky did write a poem.

One, called “Anno Domini,” written in 1968, opens with images of decadence, corruption, and indifference within the political order – the kind of life and rule to which David is headed, the kind of life and rule that has become so familiar to so many regimes in our time, regimes that are falling or being challenged these days, regimes our nation has at times propped up and at times torn down, regimes that in our sad time seem perilously close to David’s regime:¹³

The provinces are celebrating Christmas
[Brodsky writes].
The Governor-general's mansion is bedecked
with mistletoe, torches smoke by the entrance.
In the lanes the people press and lark around.
A merry, idle, dirty, boisterous
throng crowds in the rear of the mansion.

As the poem progresses, it is apparent that this celebration at the Governor-general’s mansion is about anything but the birth of Christ:

The Governor-general is ill. He lies
on a couch, wrapped in a shawl from Alcazar,
where he once served, and his thoughts turn
on his wife and on his secretary
receiving guests downstairs in the hall.
He is not really jealous. At this moment

it's more important to him to retire
into his shell of illness, dreams, the deferment of
his transfer to the capital...he allows

even his wife to be unfaithful....

In his illness and despondence, the Governor-general – who could be any corrupt ruler in any culture in any time in any place – journeys further into mental and spiritual darkness:

... What would
he think of if ... [attacks of boredom] ennui
did not plague him?...

[What would he think of] If he loved?...

¹³ Joseph Brodsky, “Anno Domini,” in *Collected Poems in English* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux: 2000), 5-7.

Brodsky concludes this first section of the poem:

*The Governor-general's wife and secretary
slip out into the garden. And on the wall
the imperial eagle, like a bat, stares down,
having gorged on the Governor-general's liver.*

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A few years after hearing the promise of house, dynasty, and unconditional love, the tides of history began to recede on the people of Israel, as David's misdeeds began to take their social and historical toll:

- David's successor Solomon becomes the last king to rule a united Israel.¹⁴
- The nation divides north against south, Israel against Judah.
- Each side has its own kings, its own prophets, its own centers of worship.
- Eventually, the northern capital of Samaria falls to Assyrians,¹⁵ the southern capital, Jerusalem, to the Babylonians.¹⁶

There is no heir of David on the throne, because the people of Israel are in exile, ruled by foreigners, with no land, no temple, no native ruler, no home.

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Yet in their season of exile and captivity, in one of the lowest points in their history, the people of Israel hear the promise to David anew.

*A shoot shall come out from the stump
Of [David's father] Jesse,
And a branch shall grow out of his roots.
The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him,
The spirit of wisdom and understanding,
The spirit of counsel and might,
The spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.
His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.¹⁷*

¹⁴ I Kings 11-12.

¹⁵ II Kings 17.

¹⁶ II Kings 25.

¹⁷ Isaiah 11:1-3.

Again, they hear:

*The people who walked in darkness
Have seen a great light;
Those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
On them light has shined...*

*For a child has been born for us,
A son given to us;
Authority rests upon his shoulders;
And he is named
Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*

*His authority shall grow continually,
And there shall be endless peace
For the throne of David and his kingdom.
He will establish and uphold it
With justice and with righteousness
From this time onwards and for evermore.*

The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.¹⁸

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In Brodsky's poem, from outside the governor's mansion, a new scene emerges and brings hope:

*... foreign gentlemen,
visiting... are leaning
over the crib like latter-day magi.
The infant slumbers. A star glimmers
like a coal under a cold font.*

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As I have shared with you before, I had the blessing to be born a few months too late to be faced with service in Vietnam and at just the right time to be able to partake – in my own region of the country – of the fresh fruits of racial reconciliation planted and watered by the courage of others, who spoke from pulpit and editorial page, who rode busses and sat at lunch counters, who took to courtroom and legislative chamber.

Ordained in 1980, I have had the good fortune, like many of you, to have served virtually all my professional life in economic times and places in which growth was so the norm that one never seriously had to plan for anything different.

¹⁸ Isaiah 9:2, 6-7.

But all that has changed in the past few years.

Even as our nation winds down two wars and begins to see sons and daughters, mothers and fathers coming home for good, even as we have been spared for a decade that which so shocked us ten years ago, we no longer seem to be a nation that gets things right.

- Our confidence in our leaders has never been lower.
- The healing of our economic wounds feels like recovery from surgery much slower and longer than expected.
- Some of our citizens disrupt town hall meetings; others occupy parks and public places – both seeking change but more sure of *why* than *what* or *how*.
- For the first time in my ministry, the number of people to whom we reach out and for whom we weekly pray because they are do not have a job is more than two or three; and while the list has not really grown in three years, it has not really shrunk either, with one or two coming off as one or two are added.
- Across the world, we watch the Arab spring but are not quite sure what it will bring. We watch China and India but are not quite sure what lies next in store for them and how that impacts us. We watch tremors in Europe and fear we might feel aftershocks here.
- And none of this gives voice to what it is like to be truly impoverished in a nation and world that perceives itself to have shrinking resources.

Whether we live in the Governor-general's mansion, work in or near it, or watch it closely simply because it is so close, we are not sure of what's going to happen next, and that is not a good feeling for us, nor one for which we have much experience or preparation.

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But there is this promise:

*For a child has been born for us,
A son given to us;
Authority rests upon his shoulders;
And he is named
Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*

*The infant slumbers. A star glimmers
like a coal under a cold font...*

For us, this means everything. Everything.