



“Once in Royal David’s City”: David’s Story in Preaching and Pastoral Care

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If the proverbial “man on the street” were asked about the history of Christmas, he might reach back as far as Luther’s candlelit tree, Dickens’s Scrooge, or perhaps Capra’s *Wonderful Life*. Few would begin in Israel, and fewer still would mention King David. Clergy and informed laity have a different perspective; we realize that the roots of Christmas, just as of Christianity itself, are indisputably Jewish. We know that the Messiah’s arrival in this world actually depended upon not one, but two, births—Jesus’ and David’s. This perspective is more than a piece of historic trivia—at this time of year, a vision that includes the “old, old story” can be useful in pastoral work aimed at redeeming Christmas from rampant, superficial sentimentality. The biblical narrative of David, Jesus’ great-great grandfather, provides one vision beyond the culturally and historically self-referential language that surrounds us today; it provides words and images that help us see beyond Christmas as just one more American “product.” A glance back at David’s kingdom also helps us avoid (in a rush to be jolly!) sermons that trivialize the complex theological and historical realities that led to the need for and possibility of Christ’s incarnation—namely, heartbreaking human brokenness and God’s inexplicable graciousness. In this article, I recall a few scenes from the history of Israel described in 2 Samuel and offer some images and stories that could enrich and deepen our seasonal homiletics.

Reading Jesus’ story in the light of David’s will broaden and deepen our appreciation of Christmas, adding new dimensions to our preaching and pastoral care.

THE OLD STORY ACCORDING TO 2 SAMUEL

Intrigue and political machinations, popular but fallible leaders, joyful homecomings and sad goodbyes, a royal family prone to scandal, war and rumors of wars, the suicide of a fallen advisor, profound grief, adultery, murder, incest, rape —there is little known to humankind that does not appear somewhere in 2 Samuel. This amazing book is as truthful as it is hopeful, as brutally honest as it is filled with divine promise. God’s assurance (“I will not take away my steadfast love,” 7:15) and human finitude (“How the mighty have fallen!” 1:19) are seamlessly interwoven into a tapestry-like narrative that displays the theme “God’s search for one good man.” The result is a profoundly theological book, for here, revealed in this messy picture of David’s court, we are brought face to face with the same stark truth that Paul and Luther rediscovered, namely, that sin and grace are and always will be two sides of the same reality. In this story we learn, once again, that each person, be he politically powerful or socially disenfranchised, will ultimately be revealed as both fool and hero, sinner and saint. We are also reminded that although God has created us to enjoy loving, faithful relationships, we remain weak creatures who can behave towards those closest to us (not only towards our enemies!) in ways that are horrifically cruel.

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The star of 2 Samuel is, of course, David—a romantic action figure, a kind of ancient James Bond who does impossible deeds and sins outrageously in the process. When joined with the overarching theme of God’s call into an everlasting covenant (23:5), the tension between faith and experience, between creation in God’s image and fallen creatureliness, leads to a complex yet familiar plot. It is a story line always present, in some form or another, in the adventures of God’s people. But to develop it such that listeners and readers can identify with the characters without being duped into forgetting these heroes’ limitations is a challenging task. In 2 Samuel the narrator does not shy away from his assignment; he heartily embraces the paradoxical nature of reality and tells, over and over, how David discovered the truth about himself, how he faced the personal and social consequences of going beyond moral limitations. David was, overall, a good king, but he also broke the very laws that restrain the greed of kings (along with the rest of us). We see, in this story, how much God loved this impetuous young man, this spontaneous dancer, lover, and warrior. God did, after all, vow to bless David’s house forever. But we also hear that, after Bathsheba, “the thing that David had done displeased the Lord” (12:1). Refreshingly, this is no censored government document; the spin doctors have not had their day presenting a cleaned-up version of what happened in Jerusalem.

NARRATIVE AND MORE

Second Samuel is, above all, a very good story. When David asks the messenger from Saul's camp (1:4), "How did things go? Tell me!" a lively tone is set for the next twenty-four chapters. This book is all about how things go, about telling what happened, and it is a telling with no small amount of literary flair and even with a sense of linear progression (at least in the first twenty-one chapters). Our storyteller is a historian who assumes, for example, that we are interested in a detailed history of Israel and Judah, that we would be amused by how some of the place names were given, that we will share his fascination with the rise and fall of court personalities. For these goals, just the facts and nothing but the facts would be necessary. But, like any good storyteller, this narrator can't quite resist the human element; every now and then he gives hints of subterranean emotions and complex motivations and reveals the unexpected, often tragic consequences that result. Mostly, the camera scans the battlefield, but at times it brings us up close—to Micah's angry face, David's grief-ridden stride, Absalom's narcissistic sneer, Tamar's tear-filled eyes. This is, indeed, a very good story; one reason to read 2 Samuel is for its sheer beauty.

But this book of the Bible is not just about someone else; it is our own story as well—a story that not only engages, but calls us to account. As I reread 2 Samuel recently, I felt challenged to face truths about my own life. I was reminded that neither the childish naiveté of denial (when I refuse to recognize my limitations) or the bitterness of despair (when my limitations are all I can see) can equip me for a life of joy and freedom. I know I'm in good company here, for it was this same paradox that led Luther to confess, albeit with different words, "I am the man," and throw himself into the arms of a forgiving God. Although my daily sins appear less dramatic (and certainly less interesting!) than David's, God calls me, too, to seek out a life of continual repentance—to confess without excuses, to allow God to transform me, and to trust solely in God's promises. This putting aside of pride, greed, and willfulness is, of course, a mission I would rather not accept; one does not read 2 Samuel with a self-satisfied face. Nevertheless, this is precisely why it should be read.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PASTORAL CARE, THROUGHOUT THE YEAR

There is plenty of rich material here to catch the attention of a pastoral counselor (such as the writer of this article). Weak parenting leads to disastrous results (David sends Tamar to her doom in Amnon's tent); sibling relationships are obviously impacted by favoritism (Absalom, the beautiful son, literally gets away with murder [13:34–39]); the memory of Saul, the father-figure, haunts David and leads to inconsistent, often reactive behavior (sometimes David honors Saul's memory [1:11–27; 9:1–11], other times he tries to wipe it out [21:1–14]); those who do not have power try to find allies in those who do (Tamar seeks help from Absalom and goes to live in his house after the rape [13:20–22]). Above all, the

tragic, systemic costs of adultery and incest are revealed, costs that are all too familiar to those of us who have accompanied the victims of sexual acting out within families.

Thankfully, there are also positive models for pastoral care. As a seminary professor, I often use chapter 12, Nathan’s rebuke of David, to initiate conversations with students about the role of straight speaking and truth telling in pastoral care. During those years when I was a full-time pastoral counselor, clients told me stories of well-meaning pastors who rushed to “look for reasons” for an affair, ignoring the pain of the betrayed spouse and moving too quickly to find ways to “improve marital communication.” First, as this story teaches us, some hard words must be spoken, some courage for a wise but honest confrontation must be found. Someone must say, “You are the man,” before the hard work of forgiveness, healing, and repair can begin. This is not only psychologically sound—it is, as Nathan’s ministry suggests, the way God wants us live.

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During the holidays, we often have people approach us with painful stories of troubled family relationships. It seems to me (more each year!) that pastoral care, in all seasons, is ultimately about finding ways to live together as forgiven members of imperfect communities. What is also clear to me is that, despite ample evidence to the contrary, God does not abandon us. Second Samuel suggests something similar. In spite of barbaric military and judicial customs, in spite of revolting factions and a nation divided, in spite of a preoccupied leader (e.g., David mourning for Absalom and ignoring his leadership responsibilities), God protects, calls back, saves, and defends God’s people. Congregations today continue to need prophetic voices, brave persons like Nathan and the wise woman of Abel, who can help us discern how we are to go about accepting God’s forgiveness and becoming reconciled to each other, whenever possible. This suggests that an important part of giving pastoral care is assisting people to reach a larger, wiser perspective, one that facilitates these practices and enables them to search out the hand of God in the everyday events of their lives (albeit discerning that hand with fear and trembling, since we are forever tempted, à la Jerry Falwell, to see those we personally dislike as responsible for our disasters).

In my former full-time practice, I had several local politicians as clients—an interesting and humbling experience. Nathan is a wonderful example of how to counsel the powerful, and it is fascinating to watch as he is given on-the-job training. At first he endorses whatever David wants (“Go, do all that you have in mind; for the Lord is with you,” 7:3), but later, after some rather explicit continuing education (7:4–17), he sees that guiding God’s anointed is a far more complex busi-

ness. Would that all the advisors of our local, state, and national leaders could find the courage, at least occasionally, to revise their words and speak the truth as God grants them the vision to see it. Perhaps then we would have more leaders who, like David, acknowledged their own failures and recognized their need for corrections, even considering the possibility that national disaster or a military defeat could result from their own failures (24:17). I cannot remember a leader since Lincoln who has echoed the words David spoke: “I alone have sinned, and I alone have done wickedly; but these sheep, what have they done? Let your hand, I pray, be against me and against my father’s house.” It would be lovely to have a way to require of all our “kings” to give a close reading to 2 Samuel.

WHAT’S DIFFERENT; WHAT HAS STAYED THE SAME

The cultural and political differences between David’s time and our own are, of course, monumental. The inferior position of women strikes us early on. It would be a grave mistake to understand Absalom’s outrage, for example, as only the result of sibling love or duty towards a sister—women were property, and to steal a woman, or to violate her, was an insult to the man to whom she belonged. It is also difficult to understand the courage of the remarkable women in 2 Samuel without appreciating what they were up against. When the wise woman of Tekoa speaks to David, for example, she uses a parable, a method similar to Nathan’s. But unlike Nathan, she speaks only with the authority granted her informally, by a tribal culture that needed all the wisdom it could get, even if from a female.¹ It is hard to imagine such courage, at such a time.

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Human emotions have not changed—the ineffable grief we feel when a child dies, the shame a woman feels when she is raped, the jealousy that plagues many sibling relationships. But the way we interpret these emotions has varied through the years. Our expectations to live with total safety and security, the amount of power we hand over to our national leader, our desire to be identified as part of a tribal community—for most of us, these are radically different.² There have been many radical cultural transformations impacting our thoughts and attitudes, changing the ways we interpret what happens to us, and thus our emotions themselves.

¹See further, Claudia V. Camp, “The Wise Women of 2 Samuel: A Role Model for Women in Early Israel?” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 43/1 (1981) 14–29.

²Although there are certainly echoes in Homeland Security, isolated presidents, and over-the-top loyalties to sports teams!

When we read 2 Samuel, especially at this time of year, we need the kind of peripheral vision that allows us to remember these subtle and obvious changes with this changed context, but it is also helpful to search for the universal and the timeless, for those things that will never fail to matter to the people of God—faithfulness, loyalty, responsibility, the capacity to forgive and to accept forgiveness. Brevard Childs taught me as a seminarian to ask the question, “Why is this book in the canon?”³ I believe the answer lies somewhere in 2 Samuel’s beauty, but also in its ambiguity, its telling of how the promises of God can look, played out in the real world. It is included in Scripture as well for the one great promise it reiterates, the promise leading to the birth of Christ. “Once in royal David’s city,” we sing each year at Christmas—yes, and what a fascinating, complicated city that was!

ROYAL DAVID’S CITY

In 1848 Cecil Frances Alexander, wife of an Anglican bishop and poet, was interested in writing a Christmas carol for children that would inspire them to think of Jesus. Her imagination led her to begin with a reference to Bethlehem, which she referred to as “royal David’s city.” Since then, Alexander’s words have captured the hearts of many carolers of all ages. Although the language she used to describe children is now quite out of fashion (“mild, obedient, good as he”⁴), what is not dated is her simple, poignant allusion to what happened “once” yet “for all” in that royal city. Alexander recognized the holy nature of that night: “He was little, weak and helpless; / Tears and smiles like us He knew; / And He feeleth for our sadness, / And He shareth in our gladness.”⁵ Because she was writing for children, Alexander was able to go to the core of the incarnation’s mystery and, in simple words, move Jesus out of the maudlin confines of a sanitized stable into the emotionally messy “city” in which David lived and in which, to some extent or another, we all dwell.

Perhaps the enduring popularity of this carol is based on the truth that, always children at heart, always lost in some strange emotional landscape or another, we desperately need someone to share our “tears and smiles”; we never stop longing for a friend who will protect us in a frightening, confusing world. Christmas is, in part, God’s response to this fundamental human need. We are reminded that, although a descendent of the powerful and prestigious David, Jesus did not enter the world in kingly garb—he came not with pomp and power, but with poverty, vulnerability, and charity. But Alexander’s baby Jesus is more than this, more than the weakness and helplessness that all children recognize; she saw also one who would carry the sadness that is part of that fragility, and who would share in both

³See further, Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflections on the Christian Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993).

⁴Cecil Frances Alexander, “Once in Royal David’s City,” in *Service Book and Hymnal* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1958) #41, stanza 3. (This stanza is not included in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* at #50.)

⁵Ibid.

gladness and sorrow. Alexander had read both parts of the story, and her eyes were open to its beauty and its truth.

For adults, Christmas joy can certainly include the simple hope of a child, and the beauty of innocent eyes opening the perfect gift—but our joy must also be set within the context of truth, within the endless struggles that are and always have been the stuff of human history. As we preach and live and celebrate this year, a vision of mature hope and prophetic truthfulness can transform the ways we use the stories and songs of royal David's city. No longer is it merely the backdrop for an ongoing, naive Christmas pageant, played out in our religious imaginations—it becomes instead the creative context for our hope-filled histories. Like the hope in the Old Testament, and like the hope in an honest hymn, Christmas hope is ultimately faith that there will come at last not a perfect world, but the son of David, the One who can and will both accompany and overcome. This utterly reliable hope recognizes a Redeemer who promises to go with the people of God, at any age, into an unknown future, as we tell and retell our personal and community stories, old and new. ⊕

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