

2 Samuel 5:1-5; 6:1-5, Psalm 150

In September we began Year 2 of the Narrative Lectionary with Old Testament stories. For the first three weeks of September, we focussed on Genesis and the creation of God's families through Abraham and his descendants. God promised Abraham a son who was named Isaac. He was the father of Esau and Jacob who was the father of twelve sons, who formed the twelve tribes of Israel. The Genesis stories were followed by stories of responding to God's love, and finally the creation of a nation.

The leadership of the twelve tribes consisted of the judges, and things were chaotic at times. Seeing that the surrounding nations had kings, the people asked God to give them a king. So, Saul became the king.

Today we read that David, who followed Saul, is anointed king. David moves the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem; the people praise God, singing and dancing, and we are left with some blanks that need to be filled in.

David was anointed to be king three times. The first time, he was anointed by the prophet Samuel, secretly, and at God's direction. That divine designation and election was prior and most important. But, David was also anointed king by a decision of the people. David's reign began in Judah where David served as a kind of mini-king for seven and a half years. It was only one tribe, but it was a beginning.

Those first years as king were troubled times. The first king of Israel, Saul, was dead. He had been a disaster. But he had been the king, and the nation mourned the loss of a leader. During his reign, Saul had lost the Ark of the Covenant to the Philistines (who dumped it

unceremoniously in a field back in the borders of Israel); Saul had drawn the people together, only to have them engage in civil war against each other – all while they were trying to fight enemies on their borders.

After the death of Saul's surviving son, Ishbaal, who had carried on a kind of civil war with David, the eleven other tribes followed. But, during those troubled times under Saul, the house of David grew stronger and stronger, as the house of Saul grew constantly weaker.

Though David became Saul's son-in-law, and was loved by both Saul's daughter, Michal, and Saul's son, Jonathan, Saul was jealous of David and relentlessly pursued David intending to kill him. As he dodged Saul, David acquired followers, resources, fighting experience, wives, and even a Philistine city to use as a base.

Now, Saul was dead. So was his son Jonathan – David's best friend. Finally, Saul's son Ishbosheth was assassinated by two of his own officers. These daring men thought they would be rewarded by David for their treachery. But instead, David ordered their execution. David the shepherd/muse who became a soldier, was seen as the true leader of the people. So the people came to him.

The multiple emphases on the place setting of Hebron, force a harsh reminder of the violence of the royal succession. Hebron was the site of both the decapitated head of Ishbosheth, buried next to other murdered potential heirs of the house of Saul. Also buried in Hebron, the maimed bodies of the avengers of David.

But, paradoxically, Hebron also indicates God's faithfulness. The collective memory of Israel saw Hebron as a place of encounter with God during the patriarchal age. In the midst of Abram's travels, he

stopped at Hebron to build an altar, where God re-iterated the promise of progeny. Both Sarah and Isaac were buried at Hebron as a reminder of God's fulfillment.

All the tribes of North Israel had no other option but to turn to David. So they all took the humbling trip to Hebron and began negotiations. They first acknowledged that David was kinfolk: *"We are all members of your family."* Secondly, they recognized his considerable achievements. "Even while Saul was our king," they observed, "you were the one who really led Israel." Third, they recognized in him Yahweh's own choice: "And the Lord has told you, *'You will be the shepherd of my people, Israel. You will be their leader.'*"

The word *shepherd* in antiquity was a synonym for king. When we hail Yahweh as shepherd in the twenty-third psalm, the title has royal overtones. "Ruler" also is a technical term, meaning something like "king-designate." The one who designates David as king is Yahweh. All that is needed now is the acclamation of the people.

An impressive number of people, thirty thousand, come to David. The joining together of north and south is underscored by the magnitude of the gathering. The allegiance to Saul is now over, and all factions are united around David.

For the next stage of the ritual, David made a covenant with them. We are not told what obligations this covenant involved. But, it would have likely included judging the people with righteousness and the poor with justice, or defending the cause of the poor and giving deliverance to the needy. David also would be responsible for their economic well-being. All this was done with Yahweh as a witness.

Now it was the people's turn to act in this ritual, and they are represented by the traditional elders of the community. They anointed David king over Israel. The Bible nowhere explains the exact significance of anointing, and whether it is king or priests who are anointed. Some customs in neighbouring countries suggest that anointing was itself an act of covenant-making. The people too were expressing their loyalty, acknowledging David as king and agreeing to their responsibilities, such as taxes, state work projects, and military service.

Throughout Hebrew history, the kings of Israel were always anointed. Elsewhere in the Old Testament, the word 'anointed' is always modified. The person anointed is the 'anointed of Yahweh,' or 'my anointed,' or 'his anointed.' The possessive pronouns always refer to Yahweh. When later kings are anointed, this no doubt stood as an indication of Yahweh's choice and the people's faithfulness. Needless to say, this was not always a perfect relationship.

The verses that follow the anointing of David as king over all Israel report David's conquest of the Jebusite city of Jerusalem, and his designating it as the capital of the newly united kingdom. Jerusalem was conveniently located between the northern and southern territories so it offered the prospect of aiding in unification.

David ruled for forty years altogether, seven and a half in Hebron and thirty-three in Jerusalem. Jerusalem was the City of David. The relocation of the capital from Hebron to Jerusalem is a crucial move. Politically, David was finding a more neutral site for the capital to unify the nation. The choice of Jerusalem as capital did not favour one tribe over another.

Strategically, the city of Jerusalem was surrounded by natural valleys and contained a sealed fresh water source within the city walls, crucial for defence against aggressors and marauding bands. Logically, the movement of the capital signifies a fresh beginning for David.

But most significantly, the biblical texts highlight Jerusalem as the city that was chosen by God. This would be the site for the temple and the palace. God's story would continuously unfold in this city. Thus, David's activities reflect his obedience and leadership as a young king.

In the second part of today's reading, David leads a massive procession to accompany the transfer of the ark of God from Baale-judah to the new capital, Jerusalem. The ark, a large box, functions as God's throne; a visible place for God's invisible presence. The ark went ahead of the Israelites as they journeyed through the wilderness.

Once anointed, King David decides that the Ark of the Covenant must be moved to Jerusalem, the capital. As we heard during the Exodus story two weeks ago, Yahweh gave instructions to Moses for the creation of the ark. The Israelite artisan Bezalel crafted the ark as per Yahweh's instruction. Moses placed the testimony in the ark and placed the ark in the tabernacle. The ark travelled with the people of Israel from Sinai into the Promised Land. Led by the Ark of the Covenant, the exiles crossed the Jordan into the Promised Land. The ark also functioned as a talisman of sorts in the siege of Jericho. The ark's first home in Canaan was in the sanctuary at Shiloh.

In the narrative of Israel, the ark goes virtually unmentioned until the time of Samuel. Samuel was called as a child servant in the temple in Shiloh. The call came as he slept "where the ark of God was."

The ark then takes centre stage when it is captured by the Philistines. Possession of the ark proved disastrous for the Philistines in Ashdod, Gath, and Ekron. The Philistines set the ark on a new cart, along with golden objects as guilt offerings, hitched the cart to two cows and pointed them towards the Israelite city of Beth Shemesh, where the townsfolk greeted the ark with rejoicing, though some looked into the ark, inciting the wrath of God. Seventy died. Not surprisingly, the survivors commented, “Who is able to stand before the Lord, this holy God? To whom shall we go so that we may be rid of him?” From Beth-shemesh, the ark is picked up by the people of Kiriath-jearim, also known as Baale-judah, where it remains until David decides to move it.

By retrieving the ark, David sets out to deliver a visible sign of the LORD’s presence and dominion in the new capital. Other ancient Near Eastern rulers demonstrated their allegiance to their god(s) and signified divine favour upon their rule by processing a statue of their city’s god into the capital and housing the statue in a temple designated for that god. However, in David’s procession, there is no temple in which to place the ark; during David’s reign it will reside in a tent.

The ark is the locus of God’s presence with the people, quite specifically identified with the place between the cherubim upon the lid of the ark, the mercy seat. The ark serves as God’s throne and place of self-revelation, where Moses would hear the voice of God coming “from between the two cherubim”.

David knows that the Ark remains an ancient symbol of power and a traditional manifestation of the presence of YHWH, so he decides to reintroduce it to the people as a sign that he, David, is now lord of the land and is the keeper of the ancient and venerable Ark of YHWH.

Moving the ark to Jerusalem was about centering the people around God. That is what the Reformation was and is about – restoring God to the center of our lives individually and communally. Here is the promise. God WILL be at the centre of life. And that looks very much like a crucified saviour, dying at the center of history and being raised from the dead for the reconciliation of all.

David's activities reflect his obedience and leadership as a young king. The procession with the Ark is described as a glorious procession of honour and celebration in transporting the Ark of God, to ensure that God's presence will fill the city of Jerusalem.

What David remembered, and what we need to remember too, is that the presence of God is a blessing and is to be celebrated, even in the midst of all its power. In the Hebrew Scriptures, God mandates celebration! God commands celebration as the presence of God in the ark comes into the community.

God does not command dissection of why and how and what all of this is going to mean, but just pure celebration. That is why David danced ... maybe he didn't feel like dancing, maybe he was still afraid of the power of death that was part of the ark, but sometimes, in the presence of God and all the blessings, we don't ask why, we just give in to our childlike side and dance. This celebration is the God-ordained response to the ark, the very mystery and presence of God, coming into their city that day.

You may have wondered: What is the connection between David's bringing the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem and Mark's Gospel describing Palm Sunday as Jesus entered Jerusalem. David had a procession to welcome the Ark into Jerusalem. Jesus, the son of David

was welcomed to Jerusalem with a procession. The significance? Jesus replaced the Ark, the seat of God, in the Tabernacle with his own body. This is the living God in person, entering Jerusalem. The people are overjoyed as they welcome the Son of David. This is a time for great celebration.

Can you imagine simply celebrating and dancing in the presence of God? Sometimes we even debate the idea of dancing in our churches. We debate what type of music should be in worship, what type of music is truly worshipful, and what IS proper worship of our God. These days, we tend to live in our heads much of the time. We comment and comment on articles on the Internet until we've exhausted every possible angle and aren't even civil with one another anymore. We think through every possible situation and try to prove our position.

When we read this story of David and the ark, we need to remember that it's not necessarily about understanding everything or even making sense of everything. Sometimes this is hard to hear. But, our artists in movie-making, song-writing, poetry, music performance, and, yes, dancing, are preaching this mystery to us in spite of our obsession with facts and proof. They tell us of a God like the God whom David knew – a God of mystery and delight and celebration, a God to be feared and worshipped, a God who showed us, like a mother, rules and guidelines for our own good on this earth, a God who has power over life and over death – a God who calls us to obey and calls us up from the dead, even death on a cross, and calls us, when we find ourselves in the presence of the mystery – to dance.

These stories about David bring an authenticity and power to Psalm 150. As the final collation to the Psalms, this Psalm was a late setting, meaning that it was compiled and placed as the finishing Psalm to the

collection, kind of a doxology for the preceding 149 chapters.

During this time, Judah was impoverished, oppressed by the Persian Empire, with little hope of restoration of the Davidic line. Like the passages from second Samuel, despite the troubles, which were neither ignored nor dismissed, this psalm continues to exhort all of God's people to "Praise him". God's work is still messy business. Praise can be very powerful and transforming. "Worship" can be such an odd word in our time, but so is the practice of thinking of anything bigger than ourselves.

The *Lord of the Dance* calls us into the mystery that we see all around us, a mystery that proclaims God's powerful presence and reminds us that God is life from death, that God's name is resurrection. May God call us and help us to live into God's mystery ... while we dance!

Amen.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE - OCTOBER 22, 2023 PENTECOST 21

Compassionate God, we are ever grateful for your unending love for us, for your patience, grace and mercy. This day we are thankful for the joys of community, for the gift of one another. We see signs of love everywhere — from handshakes and hugs to conversations and in praying for one another. We pray for our community of faith here at Grace, and for our wider community, that you continue to be with us in our happiness and weariness, celebrations and struggles.

Merciful God, we pray for our world that faces so much polarization of worldviews, which feeds intolerance and distrust, which then contributes to the conflicts, violence and desecration of lands and peoples we are witnessing. We pray for the people of Ukraine suffering from a war inflicted upon them, with no sign of an end to the invasion. May leaders at every level learn to have the courage and conviction to speak in favour of humanity and justice. We pray that all people can walk the path of peace, the path of forgiveness, the path of equality.

Loving God, we pray for the people of Israel and Gaza. We pray for those grieving the death or wounding of loved ones, for those in hiding or being held hostage, for those whose homes and lives have been suddenly destroyed. We pray that world leaders would use their influence wisely to help de-escalate this conflict and create space for dialogue. We pray for wisdom so that one day peace can prevail that is just for all people, Palestinian and Israeli. Give courage to Bishop Azar and the people of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Jordan and the Holy Land in these tragic and terrible times as they provide support, encouragement, comfort, and hope.

O God, when our hearts ache for the victims of war and oppression, help us to remember that you healed people simply by touching them., Give us faith in our ability to comfort and heal bodies and minds and spirits that have been broken by violence. When we tell ourselves that we have given all we can to bring peace to this world, help us to remember your sacrifice, and give us the miracle of losing a little more of ourselves in serving you and our neighbours.

Embracing God, we pray for those who suffer in our community and throughout the world. We remember all those who face daily persecution and discrimination. Enfold them in your loving arms. Teach us the power of love and forgiveness, that our words may be ones of healing. When we feel ourselves filled with righteous anger at those who are violent and oppressive, help us to remember that you prayed for those who killed you, and give us compassion for our enemies, too.

We pray for our national Bishop Susan and our BC Synod Bishop Kathy, for all pastors, deacons, and lay leaders. We lift up the people of Oakridge Lutheran in Vancouver, Redeemer Lutheran in Vancouver and their Pastor Katrina Vigen, as well as our sister congregation in Peru San Juan Camino De Esperanza. Guide them in their ministries with wisdom, understanding and love.

Loving God, we pray for all people in their daily life and work — for our families, friends, and neighbours, and for those who are homebound or alone. We name before you individuals and families experiencing personal hardship or facing an uncertain future, those who are separated from loved ones, those who grieve this today, and those who are sick in hospital or ill at home. Hear us as we lift up those people and those situations you have placed upon our hearts ...

Compassionate God, in Your love, hear all our prayers — both the spoken and those unsaid in our hearts. May our prayers further Your purposes for us all, and bring us to that place where we may experience the joy that has been given to your faithful down through the ages — a joy everlasting.

Amen.