

Pentecost 23 - 2 Samuel 7:1-17 - The Covenant

Last week, we learned that Hannah's baby boy is Samuel - the last Judge of Israel. He anoints Saul to become Israel's first king and later, when that didn't work out, he anoints a young man from Bethlehem to become Israel's greatest king: David. Before David can assume the throne of all of Israel, he has to fight his predecessor Saul. When Saul is defeated, David becomes the king of a united Israel. This is where today's story begins. The preface to this chapter is the long and steady decline of the house of Saul, as David's kingship is finally made secure. David is finally settled in his house, experiencing God's gift of rest from surrounding enemies.

At this point in the story David has become quite powerful – God's chosen and anointed one, a charismatic and beloved king, a military champion. He is at the top of his game (there are still four chapters to go before he acts as predator and murderer in the Bathsheba/Uriah debacle), and now he suggests that he can be a kind of benefactor to God by building a temple for the deity.

King David is in his palace. He tells the prophet Nathan that he is bothered about something: he is living in a house of cedar, but the Ark of God is sitting in a tent. Cedar wood was especially valued. This meant that David lived in an expensive, beautiful home. David had a permanent home, while the ark is housed in a temporary, flimsy place behind some curtains. David wants to build a house of cedar for God to replace the tent. David's determination to build God a suitable house might simply be self-aggrandisement. Self-aggrandisement is an understandable if not laudable reason for wanting to improve God's living quarters – understandable because David has come a long way since his days as a shepherd boy in the field.

After all, David had rescued the ark from Israel's enemy, the Philistines, and brought it back to Jerusalem. The ark contained items that connected Israel to its history with God: the stone law tablets; Aaron's rod through which God had worked miracles during the Exodus; and a few pieces of the manna God had fed Israel with in the wilderness. The ark in the centre of the tabernacle, God's tent-dwelling, told the story of God's faithfulness to his people.

Perhaps David was in a reflective mood. "Settled in his house", inhaling the sweet, clear pungency of cedar, he felt he was seeing things in a new light, or at least in a different light. A different light from that which seems always clouded with the urgency of conflict and political intrigue. He lived in a cedar house. David had arrived; he had settled. David had succeeded in climbing the royal ladder.

And so we might appreciate the incongruity that confronts him: why should the presence of God be huddled in a tent while David, a mere mortal, luxuriates in the aromatic house of kings? If David had proven his mettle as a warrior, God had proven himself as a God of power, a God capable of delivering David out of every adversity. It was time that God joined David in a more upscale way of life, a more dignified house where God's "arrival" on the world scene would be evident to all.

In the ancient Near East, kings built extravagant residences for deities at the highest points of the royal city that would reflect the gods' splendour and majesty. In this sense, David's request was not completely self-promoting, but the proper action for a new king looking to honour his God. David presumably reasons that with a new social reality for Israel as a unified country, he logically develops a burden to

create a national temple or house.

Nathan agrees, and blesses the project. “Whatever you have in mind, go ahead and do it, for the Lord is with you”, he says. Maybe it’s easier to see David’s motivation as a sign of his piety rather than an ego trip: he’s grateful to God for all that God has done, and especially for finally having a place to call home, a place to put down roots. Sojourners ache for something tangible to secure their present life, to ground themselves in something, to prove they lived, they mattered: Cedar houses, endowments, tall steeples, children attending prestigious schools – things we imagine “settle” us in the land of the living.

Likewise, the "house of God" - our churches - sometimes fit a little too easily into the world we imagine: conveniently located, user friendly, lab tested and rat approved. Like David, the house of God is always vulnerable to colonization by creaturely appetites rather than theological vision. Maybe it was this inner wisdom that stirred Nathan, from his sleep that night, awakening him from his initial blessing of David's vision.

Whatever David’s motivation might be, apparently he does not fully understand the nature of God’s grace. For God changes the equation from any sort of transaction into an unmerited gift. David need not build God a house in order for God to build David’s house. And David need not do something to pay God back before God does something more for David. God’s lavish graciousness is exemplified here as God makes it abundantly clear that, in addition to all that God has done for David, God will continue to do more.

So, that night, God came to Nathan with a different message. God is a surprising God. Rather than respond with approval, God gives a rather

sharp reply that Nathan is to take back to David. “Are you the one to build me a house to dwell in?” So, God says “no” to David’s plan.

The reason God gave David for saying no is this: I have not dwelt in a house from the day I brought the Israelites up out of Egypt to this day. I have been moving from place to place with a tent as my dwelling. Wherever I have moved with all the Israelites, did I ever say to any of their rulers whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, “Why have you not built me a house of cedar?”

Ancient tribal kings dwelled in tents in the centre of their people. So God - the true king of Israel - also dwelt in a tent among his people. The tabernacle was a sign of God’s kingdom - the temple-house God had made for himself. The tabernacle was God’s dwelling among the people on-the-move.

Maybe God’s response to Nathan is to stop David from heading down a road that led to self-aggrandisement. Every leader, even if they are as gifted and beloved as David, requires a strong sense of humility and self-awareness if they are to be effective. God reminds Nathan, and, in turn, David, that he had not commanded anyone to build a house. This is where God turns things around. David’s intent was to do something for God, maybe to say thanks, or maybe to see if God would do more if he did this gesture. But God isn’t interested in what David can do for God. Instead, God reminds David of what he has done for David - and what God will continue to do for David long after David dies.

God reminded David that physical houses are not the core of God. More than a building, God is a divine transcendent being who is faithful to the promise. And this promise to David brings hope to future generations.

Building a temple for God isn't something David gets to decide for himself. The same kind of thing happens to us, sometimes. We hatch big ideas and present bold agendas for how we're going to serve God. We launch some ambitious program. But then we find that God has said no to our plans.

Although God always welcomes our cooperation, our best and most brilliant ideas don't always line up with God's plans. That means that sometimes, like David, we must surrender our own plans to God's greater purposes. But we can do so trusting that God's plans and purposes are bigger and greater than ours.

God reminds David that God placed him where he is. God was the one behind his getting anointed, God was the one who made David king. God was with David everywhere he went and God destroyed David's enemies. God then tells David that God is making him a number of promises. David's name will be made famous throughout the earth. The Israelites now have a permanent homeland where they will not be oppressed. But God was saving the best for last. Instead of David building a house for God, God will build a house for David .

But it is not a house of stone or cedar, it is a house of people, a familial line that will stretch out into time. What God was talking about is the establishment of a dynasty. Now, in Hebrew, the word for both "dynasty" and "house" is the same. This had to be good news to David, but this dynasty wasn't just about David, but part of God's story.

Solomon, David's son, would build the temple, but more important is that from the House of David would come another that was anointed, Jesus. This is important to remember, because what God was creating was a

lineage - one that would lead to Jesus.

God is establishing a covenant with David. God would always be faithful to the lineage of David, even if his descendants didn't behave (which they didn't). They would be punished, but God would not leave the house of David. David has a dream to build a temple for God, but God decides to dash David's dream. This might be jarring to think about in a culture where we are told to follow our dreams. But here, God didn't want David to follow his own dream, but to enter into God's dream. And maybe there are times when we are invited to enter into God's dream rather than our own. We could say that Luther entered God's dream rather than his own.

In the popular culture, the Old Testament, or Hebrew Scriptures, has an angry God while the New Testament, or Christian Scriptures, has a loving version of God. We miss that there are examples of grace in the Old Testament, just as there are more images of a judgmental God in the New Testament. What we see here is an example of grace. God reminds Nathan and David of all that God has done for David. David was king not because of his smarts, but because of God. When God tells David that God will make a covenant with David, it is not because David had done a good job. God chooses David to build the dynasty that would lead to Jesus knowing that David would stray off the beaten path. David didn't have to do anything for God for the covenant to take effect.

God's grace is supposed to feel wonderful. However, here God's grace could be taken as a letdown, at least at first glance. David had big plans and God tells him that his building program isn't needed. Grace here could feel a bit humbling instead of thankful. David needs to remember that this is God's story and not his: "God's word to David through Nathan was essentially this: "You want to build me a house? Forget it - I'm going

to build you a house. The kingdom that I'm shaping here isn't what you do for me but what I do through you. I'm doing the building here, not you. I'm not going to let you confuse things by launching a building operation of your own. If I let you fill Jerusalem with the sights and sounds of your building program - before long everyone will be caught up in what you are doing, and not be attentive to what I am doing.

This is a kingdom that we're dealing with, and I am the king. I've gotten along without a so-called house for a long time now. Where did you ever come up with the idea that I need or want a house? If there's any building to be done, I'm doing it." God sent Nathan back to David with a hopeful word of promise and new possibilities. God wanted David to know what role he and his descendants would play in God's future plans. God wanted David to know that he played an essential part in God's unfolding story of salvation - a story that had begun long before David, and would continue on long after him.

First, God reminds David of God's faithfulness to him up to that point: "I took you from the pasture, from tending the flock, and appointed you ruler over my people Israel. I have been with you wherever you have gone, and I have cut off all your enemies from before you. Now I will make your name great, like the names of the greatest men on earth."

After reminding David of his ongoing faithfulness from Abraham to David, God reveals the role David's offspring will play in God's faithfulness to his promises: The Lord declares that he will build a house for you - a dynasty of kings! For when you die, I will raise up one of your descendants, and I will make his kingdom strong. He is the one who will build a house - a temple - for my name. And I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be his father, and he will be my son. Your

dynasty and kingdom will continue for all time before me, and your throne will be secure forever. And this promise to David brings hope to future generations. The promise eventually culminates in the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, when the angel declares “The Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David”.

When God says no to our best dreams and desires, it may very well be because God has a faithful and enduring yes planned for us. And God’s faithful yes most often moves beyond us, to bless others - even future generations. As we consider the vast legions of Christians throughout the world, we can see the greater glories of the dynasty-house as mediated through Christ. The Liberian economist seeks to stabilize his country's currency to alleviate poverty. The North Korean prays in secret in hopes that free worship may triumph oppression. The Peruvian farmer works the field while teaching his children about provision from God.

Martin Luther reforms the church bringing it back to the five Solas: Sola Scriptura (by scripture alone); Sola Fide (by faith lone); Sola Gratia (by grace alone): Solus Christus (Christ alone); Soli Deo Gloria (glory to God alone). All are descendants of the Davidic line through Christ. We are witnesses to this dynasty-house, created as God's promise to David. Indeed, this house is much greater, much larger, more glorious than David could have ever imagined.

God promised David a house - a son who would reign after him, and who would build God’s temple. But the promises of a house and a son go much deeper than even David could have known. Those promises reach out across the generations to embrace us today. God promised David a dynasty, a royal legacy that would go on forever.

However, by the time 2 Samuel was being written down, the nation had already been defeated by the Babylonians. Zedekiah, the last of the kings descended from David, had been blinded and deported to Babylon, where he died. So, the scripture that records God's promise to David about always having a royal heir was written after David's royal dynasty had come to an end, leaving this massive question mark hanging over God's plans for the future of his people: How will God be faithful to his promises without a son of David on the throne?

Sometimes God's faithfulness isn't obvious. It creeps into the world, into our lives, in ways we don't expect. Almost everyone in Jesus' day believed that God would raise up a mighty warrior-king like David to rescue the remnant of his people. Instead, God sent his Son - and David's - as the Prince of Peace. A poor child who, like David, was born in the blue-collar town of Bethlehem. And who did, in fact, carry some of David's DNA in his body - and Jesus was who God ultimately had in mind when he made that promise to David.

This is an unconditional covenant. It is also an eternal one; God uses the word "forever" three times to describe David's kingdom. In so many ways, David is a model for many of us, but especially as he reminds us that God's promises, gifts, and grace cannot be understood as a formula or even a reward.

God chose a king and his lineage that would fail God at times. And yet, God keeps the promise. That's the thing about grace: thankfully, God's salvation plan doesn't rely on what we do for God, but what God has done for us, for the people of Israel long ago and for all of us today.

Amen.

PRAYERS of the PEOPLE for OCTOBER 27, 2024

Creator God, on this Reformation Sunday, we thank You for those persons You have poured Your Spirit into who then set about reforming Your church. We thank You that You are still at work in the life of the church reforming us, reshaping us, and remaking us into Your image.

We pray for the church universal, for all denominations large or small, that we may love one another in practice as well as in prayer. We pray for: St. Peter's Estonian Lutheran in Vancouver – Rev. Andres Rebane (Interim), Peace Lutheran in Vernon, our sister congregation in Peru, San Juan Camino d'Esperanza and Pastor Ana Maria Jara, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Jordan and the Holy Land; for our Bishops Susan and Kathy, Bishop Anna, acting Anglican Primate Anne Germond, all pastors, priests, deacons, lay leaders, musicians, and volunteers. Bless all joint initiatives in worship, fellowship and service to the community.

We pray for those around the world who, as Christians, face danger, imprisonment and martyrdom; for those whose countries are torn apart by violence and war ... Israel, Palestine, Lebanon, Iran, Haiti and Ukraine; for those living with the threat of starvation. We pray for those unable to meet their daily needs and are living in poverty; those who are experiencing tenuous daily living due to having an unstable source of income or are unable to find secure housing; for those who are being exploited in slave labour, child labour and through sexploitation.

We pray for those who have been affected by disasters ... wildfires, hurricanes, rains and flooding, and who face outbreaks of diseases. We pray for those grieving the death of loved ones, grieving their former lives and livelihoods as they embark on the process of rebuilding their lives and communities. We grieve for the millions of refugees who have lost their homes, their families, their livelihoods, and some, their lives, in the search for safety and peace.

We pray for the feeding of the hungry, the clothing of the destitute, the housing of the homeless, the reformation of prisoners, and the rehabilitation of those who have become addicted to substances. Bless the work of every frontline agency, church sponsored organization or service, and all levels of government that are dedicated to the needs and care of

the destitute and disadvantaged individuals in our communities.

We pray for those who are in hospitals today; for those at home with illnesses, or are recovering from treatments and/or surgeries or are awaiting surgery ... Bishop Kathy, Pastor Kristen Steele; for those in long term care facilities and those who are homebound; for their families; for all caregivers; for those who are facing death; for those who have died and for those who are grieving. We pray for doctors, nurses, health care workers and home support workers and care givers.

In our zeal to defend our own world views, to prove ourselves “right”, help us to never lose sight of the reality that each person we encounter is a beloved child of Your own making, regardless of race, ethnicity, creed, economic situation, sexual orientation or identity, or age. May we behold in the faces of those around us and across this globe Your own face, filled with love and hope, mercy and peace.

We ask for Your blessing upon those change agents and reformers in society working for the greater good of all, and for those who work towards bringing justice and peace about in this troubled world. Guide governments and leaders everywhere and inspire them in Your truth, so that at all times and in all places Your will may be done.

Lord, we pray for Your church that we be a beacon of hope, grace, love and light in this world. May our open doors reflect Your open arms to all. May our arms and hands reaching out to those in need reflect Your love for all. May our forgiveness of one another reflect Your grace and forgiveness for all.

Amen

God in Community, make us all one Body, as we pray,

Our Father ...