

As we have moved quite far through our summer sermon series on King David, I sometimes wonder if we ought to have some big video screen up here next to the pulpit. As the lights dim in the sanctuary and the screen lights up, a voice would say, “Previously, on Masterpiece Pulpit at Plymouth Church,” and then we would see a montage of clips from the last several weeks of sermons, replays of key phrases and sentences from the critical reflections Matt, Stephanie, and David have offered on the saga of David. All of it would culminate in a cliffhanger, leaving us on the edge of our pews, ready to hear today’s sermon. But, alas, we’re not a PBS television series and I’m no Alistair Cooke.

We have come a long way in the story of David. We’ve watched the handsome, ruddy shepherd boy turn into a warrior with leadership savvy and incredibly emotive abilities, from poetic lament to passionate worship. Yes, last week we heard how David not only bared his body but also his soul, and he fully immersed himself in worship of God as the ark of God was brought to Jerusalem. He danced ecstatically, he attentively sacrificed to God, and he generously offered a feast for the “whole multitude of Israel” (2 Sam 6:19, NRSV).

Last week we also saw more evidence of David’s savvy leadership skills. Not only has he managed to consolidate all the tribes of Israel into one kingdom under his rule, but he has also set up the capital of this great kingdom in the then-neutrally located city of Jerusalem. He then makes a politically and religiously astute move by ceremoniously transporting the ark of God to the new capital. Yes, this is *THE* ark of God, the ark with the stone tablets that Moses received years earlier, the ark that has been with the people of Israel since their wanderings in the Sinai wilderness, the ark that has gone before them in battle, the ark that has traveled alongside and dwelt in a tent among the people, the ark that is the holiest object in Israel—yes, David has this ark brought from the home of a man named Abinadab to the newly established seat of the united monarchy.

And now, after the celebrations of worship have settled down, after David has settled into his own recently-built palatial home in Jerusalem, he turns his attention to the humble tent in which the ark of God resides. He says to the prophet Nathan, “Hey, why am I living in this great mansion of cedar while the ark of God remains parked at the local RV park.” David has settled down. Perhaps God should, too. It sounds like David has plans for his first 100 days in the Jerusalem office.

But God has other plans.

Speaking through the prophet Nathan, God indicates that God has no desire to have “a house,” a temple, built in which the Holy might dwell. Rather, God recounts God’s history with the people of Israel, having traveled *with* them from bondage in Egypt, lived *alongside* them as they settled in the land of Canaan, dwelt *among* them in their very homes. Yes, in their very homes. Like I mentioned, before moving to Jerusalem, the ark of God resided in the *home* of Abinadab. God resided *with, alongside, among* the people. God was on the loose.

And so God instructs Nathan to tell David, “Are you the one to build [the LORD] a house to live in?...The LORD declares to you that the LORD will make you a house.” God basically says, “No, I don’t need a house right now. Instead I will build you a house.” There’s a delightful play on words here. The Hebrew word used here for house, depending on context, can be interpreted as “temple,” as David intends it, or as “dynasty,” as God intends it. In other

words, the legacy of David will continue. Even after his death, his offspring will continue to reign, and God will continue to be in relationship with them.

A divine promise...and an exceptionally important one, so much so that it becomes the bedrock of both Judaism and Christianity. If you've ever wondered about the Advent hymn, "Once in Royal David's City," or pondered the prophet Isaiah's words often spoken in the Advent season: "A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse [as in King 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" (Isa 11:1-2, NRSV)—if you've ever wondered why we hear David's name mentioned in Advent and in connection with the coming of the Messiah, the Long-Awaited One, here's the reason why. The divine promise God makes to David becomes crucially important for the people of Israel, long after the Davidic monarchy has fallen; it becomes important for those early Jesus followers, like the writers of the New Testament Gospels, as they tried to make sense of the life and work and death and resurrection of a charismatic prophet who had captured the attention of so many people, including leaders in the Roman Empire. Yes, a divine promise that deeply grounds two major religions of the world. Yes, a divine promise that for generation upon generation, throughout the world, has continued to keep aflame the candle of hope—a hope that illumines the path of life and love and truth. Sometimes it's a dim flickering flame, other times a powerful blaze, but always lit...a hope that never dies. Yes, a divine promise.

But...*but* as we have learned throughout our engagement with the saga of David, the story is much more complex. It has tangled layers of intrigue and motive, ambiguity and ambition. It's—as Matt put it so succinctly last week—complicated. When we read, when we handle the story of David, our hands get messy. The messiness of this human endeavor of living and its accompanying relationships bleeds through the pages of the Bible, reflecting all too closely, all too vulnerably, our own lives today. So a pious, innocent, moralist reading¹ simply does not do justice to the text, nor to the lived realities of the ancient Israelite culture, nor to the lived realities of our lives today as people of faith who have inherited the Judeo-Christian tradition.

As we look at this story of divine promise, we cannot help but see the familiar bedfellows of faith and politics, inextricably intertwined. As one scholar notes, "There are clear ideological interests in this text. It runs dangerously close to political propaganda."² According to this text, God endorses the Davidic royal line: "When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you...I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever" (2 Sam 7:12-13, NRSV). Later kings will take advantage of this oracle of the prophet Nathan. They will exploit it. They will exploit God. They will exploit God's people. They will co-opt the word and works of God for their own purposes, as generations since have done.

It's a messy, complicated story, as is so much of the Bible. A seemingly irresolvable tension exists, one in which generations of people since have lived. It's a tension between our faith—our living, believing, trusting in God's presence—and the world's realities and interests that oftentimes run counter to the stuff of our faith...like loving our enemies, doing justice, loving kindness, walking humbly with God, praying, caring for and being in solidarity with the least of the world. Yes, this tension between faith and the interests and realities of the world.³ It's a tension, I believe, that we're called to live in day after day. It's a tension that calls us to be accountable to our faith day in and day out. Indeed, while God promises to make a house, a dynasty, for David, God also envisions a new reality for God's people, one where they will "be

disturbed no more; and evildoers shall afflict them no more” (2 Sam. 7:10). God envisions justice, peace, dignity, and respect for God’s people, for God’s holy creation. So yes, while the divine promise of the David’s dynasty will capture the attention of God’s people for years to come, this *transformative* promise includes a subtle call to its hearers: How will God’s vision of dignity and respect, peace and justice happen?

It happens when God is on the loose, when we let God be God, acting in the world and through creation...through us. The verses immediately following today’s reading note that while David’s descendents may sin, while they may err, and while God will hold them accountable for it, God “will not take away [the Holy’s] steadfast love” (2 Sam 7:15). God’s divine promise that pledges legacy and includes unending, steadfast love is inherently a relational promise, one that calls us into accountability—to respond, to be in relationship with God and God’s holy creation to bring about God’s vision for the world. It means we listen closely for God, we examine the stuff of our faith, we look critically at the realities of the world, and we respond to God’s gracious, bountiful love in one way by helping to bring about God’s vision for the world.

We live in an faith that understands the work and words of God to happen not only through the divine promise of the Holy presence that continuously, constantly, without end resides with us—that steadfast love of God. We also understand the work and words of God to happen through us. We become the hands and feet of God, channels of the unending stream of God’s steadfast love. God is on the loose—has been, and I hope, always will be—including through people like you and me, through communities of faith like Plymouth, through the church universal across the world, throughout creation, in partnership, living in the tension that connects God’s interests with the world’s reality, the tension between faith and interest. What’s best...we live in that tension together, as a community of faith, as people challenging, supporting, loving one another together in the journey...all the while surrounded by the steadfast, transformative love of God on the loose.

May it be so. Amen.

¹ Walter Brueggemann, “First and Second Samuel,” in *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1990), 2-3.

² Volumn II, *The New Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998), 1258.

³ *Ibid.*, 1258.