

“It’s Complicated”

I.

OK: Time for a pop quiz!

As of this morning, we have come just about halfway through our summer sermon series on the life of David –the greatest king in Israel’s history and easily one of the most compelling characters in the entire Bible. Since we have made it to the midterm, I thought we should start with a little quiz. Don’t panic: I know that every single one of you has been here every single Sunday of the summer, and I know that you have all been paying very close attention—sometimes I see you concentrating so hard on the sermons that you actually close your eyes...for long periods of time—you’ve been paying attention, so this should be a walk in the park. The quiz will consist of one, and only one, multiple-choice question. Are you ready?

Based on what we have learned so far, how would you describe the *character* of David? Your options are:

A.) David is clearly a saint –a hero of the faith, a deeply pious person, a paragon of faithfulness and trust in God.

B.) David is clearly a sinner –he is ambitious, ruthless, violent and vain. And we have not even made it to the story of Bathsheba yet.

Or:

C.) It’s complicated.

The correct answer...will come at the end of the sermon.

We may think of it as a subject for Sunday School, but make no mistake: The life of David is a story for grown-ups -full of sex, violence, adult situations. And while the stories we tend to tell to our children draw dramatic contrasts—obvious good guys, obvious bad guys—the Bible depicts David in subtle shades of gray. We have already started to see some of the striking contradictions in his character. He is the pretty boy chosen by a God who supposedly disregards outward appearance and looks only upon the heart; the humble shepherd boy who increasingly comes to resemble the Philistine giant he so famously struck down; the mighty manly man who breaks down and weeps and writes poetry at the death of Jonathan and Saul.

But that is the way this story goes –leading at least one scholar to speak of David’s biography as a deeply ambiguous narrative.¹ Sometimes David comes across as the kind of absurdly well-rounded Renaissance man rarely found outside of romance novels: He is a poet, a warrior, a king, “a man after God’s own heart.” You get the sense that he probably competes in triathlons and bakes quiche in his spare time. But he is also, and at the same time, a deeply flawed and fallible and even tragic figure –capable of intrigue and scheming, of betrayal and murder. Call it a tale of two Davids: a good and potentially great man weighed down by great hubris; a hero who struggles with some ferocious personal demons. And here, at the midpoint of the story, we still do not know which David will prevail.

I guess that is what makes his story so interesting.

II.

This much we know for sure: Both Davids are on full display in today's Scripture reading. This story starkly poses the question of David's character for our consideration. Is he a sincere worshipper of God, joyfully leading the people in praise? Or is he just another cynical politician, exploiting religion for personal gain?

The answer...is yes.

A lot has happened to David since we last saw him, two weeks ago, grieving the death of Jonathan and of Saul. Through a series of stunning upsets, he has led the armies of Israel to decisive military victory over the hated Philistines, and united what had been a loose confederation of tribes into one nation under his rule. Now, in the 6th chapter of 2 Samuel, David makes one last critical move to consolidate his power.

Have you ever wondered how Jerusalem got to be Jerusalem—holy city to three faiths, and arguably the most hotly disputed piece of real estate on the face of the earth? Blame David. According to 2 Samuel, David chooses Jerusalem for the capital city of his newly united kingdom. It is a shrewd move. Like the founders of this nation, David has inherited a country divided between north and south. And like the founders of this nation, David decides to establish his capital in a city that belongs to neither. Straddling ancient Israel's own version of the Mason/Dixon line, Jerusalem looks like the perfect place to serve as the seat of David's power.²

Now he needs to seal the deal. In order to do so, David decides to move the Ark of the Covenant into his new capital. As in, *the* Ark of the Covenant—the one that contains the original stone tablets bearing the Ten Commandments, the one that Israel carried through the wilderness for 40 long years, the one that Dr. Jones will someday save from the Nazis. For Israel, the Ark stands as the symbol of the very presence of God. By moving the Ark into Jerusalem—and by doing so in such an open and public display—David makes an unmistakable statement about the role that God will play in his new administration.

And like almost everything that David does, there is much to admire in this story, and much cause for concern.

On the one hand, David does here what David does best: He throws himself, with reckless abandon, into the worship of God. He drags out the tambourines, the castanets, and the cymbals; hauls out the harps, the lyres and the trumpets, and he *dances*. He dances before the LORD with all of his might. In his underwear. This is no half-hearted display, no politician's empty gesture, no going through the motions. David *means* it. And his passionate praise of God makes quite an impression. The common folk of Israel will long remember this day. They will tell their children and their children's children about the time that the king came down from his high horse, stripped off his royal robe, and got out there on the dance floor. But for that very same reason, David also earns the scorn of Michal, daughter of Saul. She is a princess of the old regime. She knows something about the responsibilities of David's office. And in her eyes, he renders himself unfit by this vulgar display. She despises David for abandoning his royal dignity.³

But David does not care. He is a passionate, hot-blooded, full-throated follower of God, loving God with all that he's got. We could learn a thing or two from him—we who stand stiffly in worship, hands thrust into our pockets; we who sometimes struggle to stifle a yawn; we who actually get bored in the presence of the Holy. David does not do

that. He *engages*. He gets into it. Like a child lost in play, he brings all of himself into the worship of God. And that is a sight to behold. That is David at his best.

But...but...on the other hand, David is David, after all. And even in this holy moment, he does not act entirely out of pure or pious motivations. In the words of Walter Brueggeman, this story leaves us with “certain nagging questions.”⁴ Here is mine: When all of this has ended—when worship is over, the hoopla died down, the people gone home, when David settles down and does some actual governing—when all of this has ended, what role, exactly, will God be playing in David’s new administration? Will God be free to question David’s policies? To challenge David’s positions? Maybe even draft some legislation? Or will God be relegated to a more ceremonial role -kept on a short leash, trotted out from time to time to stage a photo op or bless a state function? Does David bring the Ark into Jerusalem because he really wants to have God at the center of Israel’s life, or because he thinks he can have a divine mascot for palace PR?

The answer...is yes.

Some see in this story a troubling trend -the rise of “royal theology,” the belief that the God of Israel sides with the elites, champions the interests of the powerful and the privileged.⁵ It works like this: David brings the Ark into Jerusalem and his son Solomon builds God a temple. Before long, the kings of Israel will claim divine sanction for all of their pronouncements and policies –no matter how violent, oppressive or wrong. They will launch preemptive wars against nations that did not attack them; they will exploit and ignore the widow and the orphan; they will harass and hate the resident alien –all the while maintaining that God is on *their* side; all the while insisting that God approves of *their* injustice.

And they will have David to thank. He is the one who moved the Ark into Jerusalem in the first place.

III.

Do you see what I mean? In the story of David, ambiguity abounds. Motives are mixed. And even the best intentions are subject to the law of unintended consequences. In other words: it’s complicated.

But there is a very good reason for all of this. The story is complicated because it is *true*. Not *historically accurate*, necessarily, not *factual*. I’m talking about a deeper and more interesting kind of truth. This story describes a real God using real people in the real world. And so it inevitably deals in the raw material of real life: jealousy and joy, anger and elation, sadness and song. Really, when you think about it, the Bible itself is just one long story about this strangely stubborn God, this God who has always relied on complicated people to accomplish extraordinary things.

People like David. Maybe even people like us.

You see, this story isn’t over. God’s work is not complete. God gathers us into the church so that we can learn our lines, so we can play our part, in the still-unfolding story of God. Think *you* aren’t eligible? Think again. Your mixed motives, your resentments and regrets, your gnawing anxiety and your secret pain –none of that disqualifies you; none of that will get you off the hook. No matter who you are, no matter where you are on life’s journey, and no matter how complicated your life may happen to be, God wants *you*. God wants to use *your* life to bless the world.

Especially if it is complicated.

Plymouth Congregational Church
United Church of Christ
4126 Ingersoll Avenue
Des Moines, Iowa 50312
Phone: (515) 255-3149 Fax: (515) 255-8667
E-mail: mmardis-lecroy@plymouthchurch.com

Notes

¹ The scholar is Steven L. McKenzie, 2 Samuel in *The Access Bible*. Edited by Gail R. O'Day, David Peterson. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p.378.

² See the entry on "Jerusalem" in *The HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*. Edited by Paul J. Achtemeier. (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), pp.497-508. Charles Miller suggests that David moved his capital from Hebron to Jerusalem because the latter was perceived as "more tribally neutral."

³ Since this sermon takes a different direction, I do not really have the opportunity to reflect on Michal at great length, but I find her a fascinating figure. It is far too simplistic to reduce her to some sort of shrill caricature of a shrewish wife; she is also a character of deep complexity. And it is interesting to remember that her father Saul, first king of Israel, never saw the need to move the Ark into *his* capital. Her scorn for David may merely mean that she is the only one who sees this display for what it really is: a brazen attempt to co-opt the power of God to enhance the political fortunes of David.

⁴ Brueggemann, Walter et al. *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV –Year B*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), pp.422-424.

⁵ See Marcus Borg's discussion in *Reading The Bible Again for the First Time: Taking the Bible Seriously, Not Literally*. (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2001), p. 130. For a more in-depth discussion of the role of ideology in the Hebrew Scriptures, including the ideology of royal theology, see Bernard Anderson's "Biblical Theology and Sociological Interpretation." *Theology Today*. Vol 42, No 3. October 1985. Available here: <http://theologytoday.ptsem.edu/oct1985/v42-3-article2.htm>