

A Sermon for DaySpring

by Eric Howell

The Covenant of Grace

2 Samuel 7:1-14

July 18, 2021

Today and for the next few Sundays this summer, we are going to spend time with King David in 2 Samuel. Unfortunately, we'll miss some of the great stories you may remember. We won't come in from the fields with shepherd David as he's summoned and then anointed by the prophet Samuel as the new king of Israel. We won't be quaking in our boots hiding behind bold David as he confronts the giant Goliath. We won't be running with brave David as he escapes Saul's anger time and again. And we won't be parading with joyful David as he leads the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem with dancing and celebration.

Instead, we'll begin with pensive David as he desires to build God a temple, and we'll begin with prayerful David as he sits with the God who has thwarted his plans but opened his eyes to divine grace.

There's so much of David's life that stands in the background. That's true for everyone you ever meet. There's more than meets the eye, and more going on inside of them than you may realize in the moment when they do what they do. We're made the people we become through our life experiences, our successes and our failures, our hopes and our fears, virtues cultivated and vices entertained. That's true for any of us, and it's true for David. David, who we begin with today, is youngest of 8 sons, son-in-law to Saul who sometimes loved him and other times wanted to pin him against the wall with a spear. David, friend of Jonathan and husband of Michal, Ahinoam and Abigail and Maacah and Haggith and Abital and Eglah. And father of 6 children, leader of men, servant of God. David, whom Walter Brueggeman, calls "a bold, and dangerous model of faith."

After all his itinerant life thus far on the winding, dangerous path to the kingship, David finally is settled in Jerusalem and owns his first home. A house made of cedar. It's a nice house, a palace. Everyone thinks the first house they own is a palace, but his actually really was. By 2 Samuel 7, David's finally made it. The king was settled in his house. He had rest from his enemies. He's made it.

But he's restless. It's hard to stop running when all you've known is running; hard to turn of hustling when all you've known is hustling. David has made it, but he wants something more. He wants to build a house for God, a temple. He wants to do something good. The Ark of the Covenant, symbolizing God's presence, is sheltered only by a tent, literally by curtains. David imagines something much grander, more worthy of the divine than just curtains.

2 Samuel doesn't offer psychological insights, but we may wonder what is David's motivation. Is he so grateful for what God has done that he wants to repay it in some sacrificial way? Does he feel guilty for what he has and wants to atone for that guilt? "I live in a house of cedar but God

stays in a tent.” Or it is a restlessness that needs to be doing something even when everything necessary has been done, a restlessness that searches out things to do to just to do them? It’s hard to say, but sometimes when our gratitude or our guilt or our restlessness is channeled into something that looks good, no one asks the deeper questions why we are doing what we are doing.

Nathan, the trusted advisor and prophet, didn’t. David pitches this idea to him, and Nathan says, “Go, do all you have in mind; for the Lord is with you.” But that night before the ink had dried on the building permit, God spoke to Nathan and through Nathan to David.

“Nathan and David, you’re supposed to ask me these things. Remember? You have one job. Ask me and I’ll tell you what to do.”

This is the first great lesson from this story. David, the king. Nathan, the prophet. You’ve made it to the top of the mountain, but you’re still not God. You’re not even a demi-god. The king of Israel is important but not divine. At the top off the mountain, you are still just at your best, God’s servant.

Recently, I’ve been reading Eugene Peterson’s memoir called *The Pastor*. In it, he recounts the story of the church he and his wife Jan started in Bel Air, Maryland, in 1962. They started with a handful of families meeting in the basement of their home. Together, with this small group of families, they wanted to keep church simple. They committed together that worship would be central to their life together, and that their lives would be shaped, not by the rhythms of post-war suburbia, but by the rhythms of the liturgies of Sabbath and Eucharist and prayer. It all sounds pretty familiar if you’ve been around DaySpring very long.

Like our experience here, within a few years they acquired a few acres and were ready to build a sanctuary of their own. As they prepared to build, they thought a lot together about the meaning of worship, and when they did, they thought about the empty space between the cherubim on the top of the Ark of the Covenant. (How much time have you spent thinking about that?)

Scripture tells us that that the tablets of the 10 commandments of Moses were housed in a beautifully carved Ark that travelled with the people on their wilderness wanderings and led their procession into the Holy Land. The Ark was considered holy, so holy you didn’t touch it. One man learned that the hard way. The Ark represented God’s presence, and it was beautiful. Two statues of angels stood on either end of the top of the massive lid.

It was the shabby tent that housed the Ark that had David’s attention that day as he dreamed his building project, but it was the space between the angels on the Ark that captured the spiritual imagination of Eugene’s congregation. The empty space signified that we can only know God in relationship; we can’t see relationship. “It is what takes place between persons. We only know one another in relationship, in the between. We only know God in relationship, the Between. We can only be present to the Presence...

“The art of the ark repudiates all idolatries, all ideologies, all strategies. Most, in fact, of what goes for religion. We cannot make an object of God. God is not a thing to be named. We cannot turn God into an idea. God is not a concept to be discussed. We cannot use God for making or doing. God is not a power to be harnessed. (*Pastor, 186*)”

All of this prepares us to hear what God says. What follows from God to David has been called the most crucial theological statement in the Old Testament. God says, “Who are you to build me a house? Did I ask you or anyone else to build me a house? I’ve been with you wherever you’ve been—when you’ve been in the darkest days of your life and when you’ve been to the heights of life. I was there, and I will be there yet.

You will not build me a house. I will make you a house, not of cedar, stone, or wood, but a house of descendants, a family. The House of David will continue on. When you pass from this life, I will raise up your offspring, and he will reign. And I will be like a father to him, and he like a son to me. When he sins, I will discipline him, but my steadfast love will not depart from him. Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever.”

The most crucial theological statement in the Old Testament. This is the fourth covenant God had established with Israel as they became a people. First, with Noah, then Abraham, then Moses, and now David. Each of the prior 3 covenants binds God’s care, provision, and protection over the people through an if-then clause. God’s promises are conditional on the people’s faithfulness. If you do well, you will be blessed. If you do not do well, you will be cursed. If-then. This covenant with David is strikingly different. It’s not if-then. It’s ‘nevertheless.’ It’s a nevertheless covenant. Did you pick up on that? No matter what, God says, *no matter what*, nevertheless, your kingdom will last forever.

This covenant will last far longer than the palace you built yourself or the temple you desire to build for me. This promise will last forever. Not made of brick and stone, but made of tears and prayers and love and relationship. And eventually, of flesh and blood and a crown of thorns, and nails. And a stone that was rolled away and forgiveness. This is a covenant of grace.

Grace is a promise that says: nevertheless.

A covenant of grace says: no matter what I am with you.

And this promise of grace is at the heart of God’s relationship with people.

The prophet Isaiah says, “grass withers and flowers fade but the word of God lasts forever.”

Jesus says, ‘Surely I am with you to the end of the age.’

The Apostle Paul says, “these remain faith, hope, love. The greatest is love.”

The Gospels and the New Testament emphasize that Jesus is the Son of David. When they do, they have lots of things in mind: the good shepherd, the ruler over the people, but especially this covenant of grace.

The house of God won't be David's brick and mortar, but it will be Mary's womb. Jesus is the divine "nevertheless," the living covenant of grace. God doesn't really want the temples we construct to hold him: the artifices and structures of our religion; God wants our hearts, our attention, our relationship, our lives, the Between. All that is between. We are living stones made into a living temple of grace.

Our right response to this grace isn't restless self-justification of our worthiness of the gift we've been given. The response, well, look at David. What follows this is one of the great, overlooked, prayers in the Bible. The second half of 2 Samuel chapter 7 never shows up in the Lectionary and often may be overlooked, but don't overlook this prayer.

After hearing this word, David left his palace, which he had thought magnificent, and went to God's tent, which he had seen as sort of shabby... and sat. Sitting is an unusual posture for prayer back then. One would expect him to kneel or to stand, but he sits, like a child. Criss-cross Applesauce. The King of Israel sits before the Lord. The King sits, not on a throne, but on the dirt, the dirt from which we are all made; he sits in the dirt before the Lord, before the empty space between the two angels on the top of the Ark of the Covenant, and prays:

"Who am I, O Lord God, that you have brought me this far? Who am I before you?"

Who am I? It's a prayer of humility in the presence of God who unmakes who we have made ourselves and remakes who we are in His image. To build us a house, God invites us to leave the palaces we build for ourselves and join the uncontained God in the temple of the world.

Humans are not expected to build a house for God but to accept the house God has built for us. Christians believe that God in Christ rules forever, and that his promises extend for all time.

"God has built not only a spiritual house, but an eternal home (John 14:1-3). Like David, [in God's presence, we] are confronted by the amazing truth that pleasing God does not grow from building a house of good works, but through humbly accepting the house of grace and promise that God has built for his people." (Tony Cartledge, "A House for God and a House for David")

Whether at the highest highs or the lowest lows, may we know God's gracious promise and may we have the grace to confess with David, "You are great, O Lord God. There is none like you, and there is no God besides you."