

THE SHEPHERD KING: RULE LIKE A KING

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2 Samuel 5:1-5, 9-10

Today, I want to look at two stories from the life of King David that we find in the book of 2 Samuel. The first story is our reading for today which tells of David being crowned king of Israel. The second is a small story that you likely have never heard that describes to us the type of king that David aspired to be, the reason that God chose David to be king.

In the story of the Exodus, God led the enslaved Hebrews out of Egypt and across the wilderness into a new land that they could call their own. The Hebrews settled there with each tribe sticking pretty much to themselves. However, the Philistines arrived and began encroaching on the lands claimed by the Hebrews (who were by then known as the Israelites). Under the Philistine threat, the tribes united and called a warrior named Saul to lead them as king to consolidate the Israelite defenses against the Philistine incursion. God sent the prophet Samuel to anoint Saul as king.

Saul was largely successful in leading the Israelites against the Philistines. However, his record as king is less noteworthy. The greatest strike against him is that he failed to follow God's commands. As a result, God sent the prophet Samuel to anoint another to be king. God sent Samuel to anoint a shepherd boy named David, the youngest son of Jesse.

Last Sunday, we explored the timeless tale of young David defeating the Philistine champion Goliath. Goliath came to battle armored with the latest military technology. But David defeats him with the simple tools of a shepherd—a sling and a rock. David prevails because of his enduring faith that God is with him.

In our reading for today, we discover that, after many years, David is finally crowned king of all Israel. Some years earlier, Saul had been killed in battle and his son assumed power. While Saul was still alive, David had made a name for himself as a general in Saul's army. David was so successful in battle that there was a little song that the people sang about him: *Saul has killed his thousands, and David his tens of thousands*. The song, of course, did not please the king.

When Saul died and his son succeeded him, David was called by the tribe of Judah to become their king. He accepted and ruled from the city of Hebron for seven and a half years.

During this time, Saul's son Ishbaal continued a lengthy war against the house of David. But David grew stronger as Saul's house grew weaker. One day, two of Ishbaal's captains assassinated their king and then brought his head to David. They

likely could see the writing on the wall and knew that they were on the losing side. They figured that by killing Ishbaal they would ingratiate themselves with David. But it didn't work out that way. This is one example of what makes David a different sort of king. Instead of rejoicing at the death of his enemy, David grieves. He has the two captains executed for defiling the house of Saul. Why? Because despite the ongoing conflict between David and Saul, David still recognizes that Saul was once anointed by the Lord. And David honors that in his heart.

With Saul's house in disarray, the tribes of Israel once again unite and send their representatives to David at Hebron. They say to him, *Look, we are all flesh and blood family. Although Saul was our king, we know who led our armies. We know that the Lord said to you, 'It is you who shall be shepherd of my people Israel, you who shall be ruler over Israel.'* The people were ever so humbly asking David to become their king. David accepts and makes a covenant with all the tribes. The elders anoint him king over all Israel. David then captures the fortified city of Jerusalem from the Jebusites and makes it his capital. He calls it the city of David. He becomes greater and greater because, as we read, *Yahweh, the God of hosts, was with him.*

Without a doubt, the entirety of our scripture, both Old and New Testaments, regard David as a great king, perhaps the greatest in all Israel's history. But David was far from perfect. He was violent and lustful and manipulative. But still, he was chosen by God to be king. Why? Why did God choose this man and not someone else? This is the question that I believe is central to David's story as well as this series of sermons. Why was David chosen? Why was David anointed by the Lord?

David clearly was not a perfect person or a perfect king. In the account of his anointing, God was not drawn to outer appearances, but *the Lord looked on the heart*. Later, we will read that David is *a man after God's own heart*. God has the ability to see into us and to observe our motivations. God is less concerned that our actions are pure and more concerned that our motivations are rightly aligned. David was dedicated to serving the Lord. And God could see that and that pleased God. David was chosen because he kept God first in his heart.

One example of David's goodness can be found in a small story in the ninth chapter of 2 Samuel. The story revolves around a young man named Mephibosheth. That is a lot of word, so I'm just going to call him Bo. Bo was the son of Jonathan and Jonathan was the son of Saul. Jonathan and David had been extremely close. Jonathan even protected David when Saul, in the depths of his madness, was determined to kill David. Jonathan and Saul died in the battle at Jezreel when Bo was just five years old. When word of the battle reached their home, Bo's nurse picked him up and began to run fearing for their lives. She dropped the boy which injured both of his legs. The legs never healed correctly, and he was crippled for the rest of his life. He ended up living with another family in a remote part of Israel, a place so barren that its name translates literally as "no pasture" (Lo-debar).

After David had become king and was settled in Jerusalem, he posed this question to his advisors. He asks, *Is there anyone left of the house of Saul to whom I may show kindness for Jonathan's sake?* No one does, but one person remembers one of Saul's servants. They send for this man. When he arrives, he reports that the last remaining descendant of Saul is the one we are calling Bo, who is now a young man. David sends for him.

Bo is brought to the king, and he assumes the worst. He assumes he is about to face the sharp end of a sword. After all, as a descendent of Saul, he is certain that King David views him as a threat to the throne that must be eliminated. He hobbles before the king and bows and proclaims, *I am your servant.*

But David tells him not to be afraid. And then speaks the last words that Bo expected to hear. David says, *Do not be afraid, for I will show you kindness for the sake of your father Jonathan; I will restore to you all the land of your grandfather Saul, and you yourself shall eat at my table always.* Bo drops to his knees before the king and asks, *Who am I that you should look at me, a dead dog?* This man—crippled, orphaned, poor, outcast—knows that in the eyes of this king, that he is negligible. He's like the corpse of a dog that's been out in the sun too long. He has no value to anyone. To prove his intent, David calls for the servant and proclaims in his presence that everything that once belonged to Saul and his family now belongs to Bo. He commands the servant and his people to work the land for Bo and reaffirms his invitation that Bo eat at David's table forever.

To eat at the king's table would mean that Bo is once again recognized as nobility. It is as if David is adopting him as a son. David cannot heal the lame as Jesus would, but he is certainly restoring this man's life by granting him his family property and offering him a place at the table. We read, *Mephibosheth ate at David's table, like one of the king's sons.*

What David does here is extraordinarily gracious. But it is also dangerous. This man could make a claim to the throne.

No matter how you look at it, what David does is a surprising move for someone in his position. As king, he should rejoice at the plight of his enemies. The eradication of the house of Saul would be to his advantage. But no, David seeks to restore that house. And scripture explains that his motivation is *to show the kindness of God* (2 Samuel 9:3).

There are other ways to explain David's actions. You could say that by extending an olive branch to Saul's house, it would appear that he is seeking to mend fences with Saul's supporters—a crucial constituency of his new kingdom. Or maybe David wanted to keep an eye on this potential claimant to the throne. You know, "Keep your friends close, and your enemies closer." Another reason might be that he is just being nice to family. David's wife (one of them, anyway) is the sister

to Bo's father which makes David his uncle. However, given the many times that Saul's family sought to kill David, he would be justified in doing nothing.

What we see here is David performing this deed of kindness in the name of the Lord. David demonstrates the grace that God showed to him when God called him as a young shepherd. David is not being soft. He is expressing a deeper demonstration of love that is undeserved, unearned, and unrepayable. David changes this man's life with an act of generosity; he brought healing and restoration to a broken existence.

The stories of David reveal to us a person who was complex and nuanced and less than perfect, but who still sought to do good—to show compassion and kindness and forgiveness in the name of God. He knew of God's love and he sought to live that love.

We ourselves are aware of our own mistakes in life. But if we can keep God in our lives then we can seek forgiveness with the assurance that God knows the depths of our hearts. May we be the people of God's own heart.