

THE SHEPHERD KING: LIVE LIKE A KING

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2 Samuel 7:1-17

Some years back, I was the guest preacher at a Presbyterian church. The service had ended and I was standing at the front door greeting folks as they departed. The end of the line reached me and there was a man waiting who clearly had something that he wanted to say to me. We shook hands (we did that back then), and I said, “Hello.” He said to me, “Can I tell you a funny story?” I said, “Sure, why not.” And he said, “Let’s step outside,” and motioned out the front door of the church. I crossed the threshold with him out to the front portico and the man proceeded to tell me a joke. He was very proud of his joke. I don’t remember the specifics, but I don’t recall that it was very funny. It was also a little off color. It was a joke that you wouldn’t want to tell in “polite company.” I could see why he wanted to step outside.

I was a guest in that church, and I didn’t know this man, so there wasn’t much I could do. The joke wasn’t awful; I’ve certainly heard worse. But, later on, as I reflected on that moment, I was increasingly troubled. I wish I could have handled the situation differently. I’m still not sure what the best course of action would have been, but I now know what I would have liked to have said to this man.

Why did this man ask me to step outside the church? Well, clearly, because he felt that his joke was inappropriate for the sanctuary. We all can understand this. The sanctuary is a sacred space, and by sacred, we mean it is holy, that God is present there. But why step outside? Did the man feel that God was in the church but not in the world? This is a trap that we all fall into—believing that God is inside but not outside, that God is limited to one location.

Later, I decided that what I would have liked to have said to the man is this, “You know, if you are not comfortable saying what you want to say in here, then I’m not sure it is something that I want to hear out there.” In other words, if you won’t say it in front of God, perhaps it shouldn’t be said.

Today’s sermon is the fifth in this summer sermon series on the life of King David. As we go through this series, I will keep asking the question why did God choose this particular person to be king? He wasn’t a member of a royal family. He wasn’t next in line for the throne. In fact, in his own family, he was youngest of the eight boys. He was never destined to be king of anything. He was a shepherd boy and yet God chose him; God anointed him. What was it about this person that was so special?

The answer is that God chose David because David, at heart, was a shepherd. As king, David would rule over his people—God’s people—with the care of a

shepherd watching his flock. As a shepherd, David understood that he worked for someone else—the owner of the flock. The sheep didn't belong to him, but they were in his care. And David cared for and protected and led the sheep with a Godly devotion. David understood the relationship between the sheep and the shepherd and God. When David went up against the Philistine champion Goliath, he wasn't afraid because he remembered how God had protected him as a shepherd as he guarded the sheep. David would rule his kingdom like a shepherd guards his flock. He was a shepherd king.

Last week, we read the account of David bringing the Ark of the Covenant from the countryside to its new home in Jerusalem. The ark was the box containing the tablets with the Commandments and was viewed as God's throne on earth. As the ark was driven towards Jerusalem, David led the procession with dancing. He brought the ark into the city and placed it into a tabernacle that he had constructed—a tabernacle like the one Moses had made for the ark so many generations earlier.

David was hugely successful as king. He succeeded in every way that his predecessor Saul had failed. As king, David established his home in Jerusalem after capturing that city from the Jebusites. It was the capital of Israel. He made Jerusalem the home of the ark. He defeated Israel's enemies. He built a palace of cedar wood (from Lebanon, of course). All this success provided him with the freedom to relax and reflect on his life. And as he reflected, one thing began to trouble him, and that was the disparity of him residing in luxury in his palace, breathing the sweet aromatics of the cedar wood, while God remains outside in a tent. David recognizes the imbalance of the situation—his living in the grand palace and God in the canvas tabernacle. It didn't seem proper. Other kings build magnificent temples for their gods. It appears that David has done nothing for his God. So, David formulates a plan to build a temple to house the Ark of the Covenant. It will be a building worthy of his God.

David calls in Nathan the prophet and begins to explain to Nathan his plan. He says to Nathan, *See now, I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent.* Before he gets any further Nathan interrupts him. Nathan doesn't need to hear the entire plan. He's heard enough. He gets it, and he says to the king, *Go, do all that you have in mind; for YHWH is with you.*

As a pastor, I certainly understand. Let's say that one day I get a call from a church member who asks me to come to her office. I go and that person talks about our church and its needs. She focuses on the church's lack of adequate space for our Sunday school classes. She observes that we've got children meeting in old closets. She suggests that we build an education wing and she offers to pay for it. She also promises to handle all the construction details. It will be a turnkey operation. All she needs from me is to say yes. And you know what I would say? I would say exactly what Nathan said, "Go, do all that you have in mind." (Now, it's usually at

this point that I wake up from this dream.) But Nathan wasn't wrong. David had good plan. They needed a temple. *Go. Do it. YHWH is with you.* Nathan gives David the prophet's stamp of approval.

But we learn that Nathan was wrong and God was not okay with David's plan. That very night, God calls to Nathan and instructs him to go back to the king. God wants Nathan to relay a message.

And the message is this: David is not the one destined to build God a house. God reminds David that since the time the Hebrews were wandering in the wilderness that God has never had a house, that God has always lived in a tent, that God has moved around with the people. Never has God asked for a home of his own.

God informs David that it won't be David who builds God a house but rather it will be God who is going to make David a house. And when God says house, God uses the word *bayit*, which means kingdom or dynasty. What God is going to establish for David is an eternal kingdom.

David fell into the trap of associating God with a place, a locale, a structure. And that is understandable since the Israelites associated the location of the ark with God's place on earth. But God is not limited to a shrine or a building. God is everywhere. Our God moves about with us. Our God makes every place sacred.

God's promise to David was not just for a kingdom, it was a covenant. It is God's commitment to watch over David and his people forever, a commitment to be like a parent whose love is guaranteed through the ages.

But there is more to the covenant than just God's promise. There is also the expectation on David's side. God will give David a great name and a house for his descendants. But, in turn, God expects those who populate that house (or kingdom) to do so *in God's name*. As we find in today's reading, *I will raise up your offspring after you... and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a kingdom for my name.*

That man who pulled me aside to get away from where God could hear him clearly misunderstood the church. The church is not the place where we keep God, the church is a sign of the greater kingdom. At its best, the church points to the kingdom. It should be like a great flashing arrow in the middle of town telling people, "Good Stuff Here."

This building, like every church, does not contain God, but reminds us that God is with us as God promised. The purpose of this sanctuary is to focus our whole being on the presence of God and invite us to worship the one who commits to be with us in every time and place.

We consider ourselves the spiritual descendants of David. We are the residents of that promised kingdom. So, the million-dollar question is, are we living in such a

way so that others will know that God's name is on this kingdom? When they look at what we do and how we live, it is obvious that we are working for God?

Every person inhabits one kingdom or another. That kingdom determines our priorities, the way we live. Our kingdom may be money, or family, or power, or faith. Sadly, not every kingdom has God's name on it.

This week, as we watch the news, we are watching, in real time, the fall of the government of Afghanistan to the Taliban militants. As of Friday, the Taliban had captured over half of the regional capitals of Afghanistan and were converging on Kabul. Kabul will soon fall.

The Taliban emerged in 1994 as a faction in the Afghan Civil War. They are influenced by a radical and strict interpretation of Islamic Law. They use atrocities and terror to enforce their will. They kill those who stand against them. They enslave women, take child brides, and prohibit girls from working or getting an education. Our prayers must be with the innocent people of that country.

It is clear when we look at the actions of the Taliban the sort of kingdom they are building—one of fear and power.

The Taliban is an extreme example. It's not difficult to look around and see people creating their own kingdoms. It's usually not difficult to see whose name is attached to those kingdoms.

As people of faith, as descendants of David with whom God made that covenant, we should strive with all our heart and soul and mind and strength to construct God's holy kingdom on this earth—a kingdom built on a foundation of love, compassion, forgiveness, and mercy.

I would like to close with God's words spoken through the prophet Isaiah: *Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool; what is the house that you would build for me* (Isaiah 66:1).