

I Will Give You Rest
A Sermon on 2 Samuel 7:1-17
Proper 11
July 22, 2018

Introduction

Today's text is a turning point in the collection of stories known as 1 and 2 Samuel. Walter Brueggemann calls it the dramatic and theological center of the Samuel stories.

It is a transition from the days of the judges to the rule of kings. Israel is evolving from a group of tribes into a nation-state.

The people asked Samuel to appoint a king for them to deliver them from the Philistines. Saul was unable to subdue the Philistines and was rejected. David succeeds Saul as king and defeats the Philistines. He has captured Jerusalem and made it his capital city. He has brought the ark to Jerusalem to legitimize the new city. After today's text, the drama will turn to David's personal failings and the revolt of his son Absalom.

God makes a covenant with David and with Israel in today's text. It ranks with the covenants with Moses at Sinai and with Abraham in Genesis as the most significant covenants that God makes in the Old Testament. It is a new understanding of God's presence.

First Move: David Wants to Build a House for God

David has settled in a newly-built palace in Jerusalem and the kingdom is at peace. Yahweh has given David rest from all his enemies.

Yet David is troubled. He tells the prophet Nathan that he lives in a house of cedar, while the ark of God is housed in a tent. The clear implication is that David would like to build a temple for Yahweh.

David seems to be concerned for the honor of Yahweh. There could be another motive. David is clever and calculating. He could want to further legitimize his rule by building a temple. Kings in the ancient near East built temples next to their palace so that they could be sitting at the right hand of God. A temple showed that the king enjoyed divine favor.

Nathan tells David to proceed, "Yahweh is with you." This is the first mention of Nathan. He is the first prophet to be mentioned since Samuel.

The word of Yahweh comes to Nathan that night, apparently in a dream. The rest of today's text is the word of Yahweh, which Nathan relays to David.

God rejects David's proposal. The tone is not angry but firm. God has not asked for a house. God has traveled with the people in a tent since the days of Moses. To live in a house would restrict God's freedom. Building a temple suggests that God's presence can be captured and limited to a place. God treats David's desire to build a temple as a desire to domesticate or control God.

Yet God recognizes that David has a legitimate desire to be reassured of God presence. God tells Nathan to speak to David.

In the ancient world, the responsibility of the messenger was to repeat verbatim the words entrusted to him. Messages were given in the first person and prefaced with a formula, such as, "thus sayeth the Lord."

"Tell my servant David." God begins by reminding David that he is a servant and has overstepped his place. "I took you from the pasture, from leading the flock to ruling over the people of Israel. I have been with you wherever you went. I have cut off all your enemies before you." David is a great warrior, but his success is God's doing. The enemies include not only the Philistines, but also the enemies in the civil war, Saul, Abner, Ishbaal, and those who stood in the way of David's kingship.

God turns to the future. "I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth." The Jews did not believe in an afterlife. A name was a way of living on into the future. People lived on through their offspring and through the memory of the people.

"I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may live in their own place." This means a place of worship. God will decide when and where to build a temple where the people can worship. The temple will nourish them. They will be rooted in firm ground that will allow them to grow.

It is a vision of peace. "The people will be disturbed no more; and evildoers shall afflict them no more, as in former times, from the days that I appointed judges over my people Israel."

"I will give you rest from all your enemies." This is not Sabbath rest. It is freedom from fear, security from your enemies. It has been promised since Deuteronomy 12:9-10, when Moses told the people, "You have not yet come into the rest and the possession that the Lord your God is giving you." God's vision is that the people will have a place that they can call their own. There they can devote themselves to worship instead of to resisting their enemies. Then God will choose a dwelling where God's name will live and the people can bring burnt offerings and sacrifices, tithes and gifts to the Lord.

Second Move: God Want to Build a House for David

Then comes the eternal promise. “You will die in peace and lie down with your ancestors.” Dying in peace was considered a blessing. “When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your seed after you, one who comes out from your body, and I will make his kingdom firm.” David’s name will live on through his son. This, of course, is Solomon. He will enjoy the rest that I have given you. “He shall build a house for my name, and I will make the throne of his kingdom firm for the ages.” David’s son will build the temple and God will make his son’s kingdom firm forever.

This is new. God has rejected hereditary succession in the past. God has insisted on picking a prophet and a judge for each generation. We have seen the problems with the sons of Eli and the sons of Samuel. A faithful father is no guarantee that the sons will be faithful.

What is different now is that God promises to be with the son. “I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me.” This is the closest bond that was known in the ancient world. No longer will the king have to worry about whether God hears his prayers. God will be right beside him. “When he does wrong, I will punish him with a rod such as men use.” God will correct his mistakes instead of abandoning him.

“But I will not take my *hesed*, steadfast love from him, as I took it from Saul.” God will remain loyal to the son even when the son strays, even if he acts like Saul.

God then reverses David’s proposal. David wanted to build a house for God, but God chooses instead to build a house for David. “Your house and your kingdom shall be made steadfast forever before me; your throne shall be firm forever.”

This is a play on words. House in Hebrew and in English means both a place of worship and a royal line of succession. The promise is not only for David, but for all his heirs, forever.

Grace is a Christian word, but it applies here. God’s promise has always been conditional to this point. “If you follow the word of Yahweh, you will be blessed.” Now the promise is unconditional. God will remain with the king, even in the presence of sin. God will punish the king, but God will not reject the king, as he did Saul.

This is the central promise of the Old Testament. It is what gives Israel hope in exile. They no longer have a place of their own and a king. Yet they firmly believe that God is still committed to David’s line. Israel saw David as its ideal king and it

retains hope that a king from David's line will rule again. This is the hope of a Davidic messiah.

Third Move: God Wants to Give Us Rest

This is a text about royalty theology. There is a tension between piety and propaganda. God shows loyalty and special favor for the king of Israel forever. There is a danger of conflating theology and political ideology.

There is also a danger of supersessionism. Christians claim that Christ is David's successor and that America has succeeded Israel. It takes a covenant that was made with a Jewish king and the Jewish people and replaces them with Christ and the American people. It is the foundation of the belief in American exceptionalism.

It doesn't have to be either/or. It can be both/and. Americans can believe that God has a special relationship with America without denying that God has a special relationship with Israel. People for whom these texts are Holy Scripture cannot avoid seeing themselves in the texts. The Bible tells the story of how God has been active in the life of faithful people in the course of history. Jews and Christians rightfully see them as their ancestors in faith.

We also should see this as a political text instead of a devotional text. It says that God is with the king, not that God is with each of us. It does not deny that God is with each of us; simply put, we as individuals are not the point of the text.

It would be easy to challenge the text if we read it as a historical prediction. We know that the line of David did not endure on the throne forever. The peace was not lasting. Israel divided at the death of Solomon into a northern kingdom and a southern kingdom. The southern kingdom was conquered by Babylon about 400 years later. Even today, when Israel has its own land, it is ruled by a parliament, not a Davidic messiah.

It helps to see the text as God's vision for a healthy kingdom. I will give you rest. There is still an *if* there. *If* you are concerned for the welfare of the people instead of for your own self-interest, if you pursue your own interests instead, I will punish you, but I will not abandon you.

Mainline Christians don't like to think of God as punishing us. John Dominic Crossan helps with that. He speaks of punishment as the natural consequences of sin. If we oppress people, we will have no peace. There will be unrest that bubbles beneath the surface that will boil over if it is not addressed.

People are distressed today about the health of our kingdom. People have a hard time believing that our political leaders are guided by the common good. Self

interest and political power seems to be all that matters. Many have apocalyptic fears that democracy is dying and that fascism is replacing it.

The historian Jon Meacham addresses these fears in *The Soul of America: The Battle for Our Better Angels*. He reminds us that Americans have been guided throughout their history of a vision of, “We the people, in order to form a more perfect union.” We believe that all men are created equal, and have always fallen short. Originally, it applied only to white men of property. American history has been a struggle to extend the promise of equality to all people, to women, to African-Americans, to poor people, to LGBT folks, to immigrants, to prisoners, to foreigners. To all people without qualification.

We believe that we are living in a crisis now, and we do indeed live in times of trouble. Meacham offers us comfort by looking at struggles in American history and how we dealt with them, how movements and leaders emerged to confront the struggles. The crisis today pales in comparison to the Civil War and Reconstruction. The struggle for equality for African Americans has been part of American history from the beginning, and resulted in war that brought a political resolution but not lasting peace. Inequality simply took a different form, evolving from slavery into black codes, segregation and Jim Crow. It continues today in the form of mass incarceration, income inequality and suppression of voting rights.

Oppression does not go unpunished. People of good will come together in movements to overcome the oppression. Movements of abolitionists and people committed to civil rights produce prophets like Martin Luther King who challenge segregation, and political leaders like Lyndon Johnson who introduce and enact legislation to end it.

God will give us rest if we do the hard work of including all the people in We the People. I have discerned that my own call is in criminal justice, helping to make the prisoner, even the prisoners on death row, part of We the People.

Conclusion

We have been talking about building a new house for God on the road. We will be undergoing several months of training and education about new church starts and we will be undergoing a discernment process. What is God calling us as a church to do to promote the common good?

The promise is that God will be with us. That is a curse and a blessing. It is a curse because we will be called out of our comfortable places into the struggle. It is a blessing because it will give us rest.

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