

The Miracle of Unity
A Sermon on 2 Samuel 5:1-10
Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
July 8, 2018

Introduction

I think it is fair to ask, why are we preaching on 1 and 2 Samuel this summer? These texts are filled with violence. David is responsible for a lot of that violence. Where is the good news in that?

I believe that the most important thing we get out of 1 and 2 Samuel is a better understanding of David. Most of us don't know much about David after you get past the stories of Goliath and Bathsheba. What kind of a king was David? Why does Israel celebrate David as its greatest king? Why is Israel so forgiving of David's obvious sins?

The gospel writers thought it was critical to show that Jesus was born of the line of King David. What does that tell us about Jesus and how the gospel writers understood him?

David is crowned twice as king in today's texts, first as King of Judah, then as King of Israel. We are introduced to royal theology.

First Move: King of Judah

Mary preached last week about David's lament for Saul and Jonathan after he heard that they had been killed in battle.

Now the time for mourning is ended. Political realities intrude. The Philistines are occupying Israel. Saul's armies are responsible for defending Israel and Saul is dead.

David is in Ziklag, on the southwest border of Judah. It was also claimed by the Philistines. It was part of the kingdom of Gath, the town where the Ark of the Covenant was first taken when the Philistines captured it.

David turns to God for guidance. He uses lots called Urim and Thummin to ask questions of God. The lots were like a Ouija board. The disciples used these lots after Jesus' ascension to determine that Matthias should be the 12th disciple.

David asks two questions: "Shall I go up into one of the cities of Judah?" Yes, said the lots. "Where shall I go?" The lots spelled out, Hebron. Hebron was the

largest city in Judah. It was located on a mountain ridge in the south and had a good water supply. It was easy to defend.

So David went to Hebron. David is always shown as responding faithfully to God's command. He takes his wives and his mercenary army and their families with him. David was a mercenary for the Philistines in the last chapters of 1 Samuel.

The elders of Judah come to Hebron and anoint David as king of the house of Judah. David was anointed by the prophet Samuel in 1 Samuel 16, when God sent Samuel to Bethlehem to find the son of Jesse that God had chosen to be king of Israel. To anoint a king is to pour oil over the king's head. It is a sign that the king will bring fatness to the land.

David has now been recognized as king by God and by the people. But only the people of Judah, the southern kingdom, have recognized David as king. It could be seen as rebellion for Judah to select its own king instead of waiting for a successor to Saul.

The northern kingdom of Israel are under the control of Abner, the commander of Saul's army.

David's first act was to inquire of the Lord. That is in contrast to Abner, who *takes* Ishbaal, a son of Saul, and brings him to Mahanaim, a remote city that lies beyond the Jordan River, at a distance from the hostilities with the Philistines. Remember that when Israel demanded a king in 1 Samuel 8, Samuel told them that a king would take and take and take. Abner's first act is to take.

Saul's three oldest sons have been killed in battle. Even though the text says that Ishbaal was 40 years old, some scholars believe that Ishbaal may have been a child. Abner alone made Ishbaal king of Israel. There is no suggestion that the people agreed to this. Abner may have considered himself to be regent, or acting king, until Ishbaal came of age.

Seven years of civil war follow. The author describes it as a war between the House of Saul and the House of David. The forces of David grew stronger and the forces of Saul grew weaker.

Abner seek to negotiate a treaty with David. He sends word to David to enter into a covenant with him and he will bring all Israel with him. David is a shrewd negotiator. He asks that his wife, Michal, be returned to him. Michal is a daughter of Saul. Marrying her would give David a legitimate claim to the throne of Israel.

Abner is assassinated by Joab, the commander of David's army. Abner had killed Joab's brother in battle and Joab murders him in revenge. All Israel was terrified by the death of Abner. Then Ishbaal is killed, Mafia-style, in his own bed.

The lectionary skips the messy parts. That brings us to today's text.

Second Move: King of Israel

All the tribes of Israel come to David at Hebron. Their king and commander are dead and the Philistines are still threatening them. They have nowhere else to turn. It is as if they are pleading with David to rule over them.

The elders of Israel acknowledge that David brought military victories to Israel when Saul was king. Saul killed his thousands, but David killed his tens of thousands.

David makes a covenant with the elders of Israel at Hebron, but the terms of the covenant are not described. The elders ask David to be a shepherd of the people, emphasizing that a shepherd cares for the people. The seeds of democracy are already at work in David. David becomes king at the request of the people. David is a shepherd king who cares for the sheep. The elders anoint David as the king of Israel. David was 30 years old when he takes the throne of Israel. Is it just a coincidence that Jesus is described as 30 years old in the gospels? David will serve for 40 years, a nice round number that may be more symbolical than historical.

David's first act as king of Judah and Israel is to capture Jerusalem and make it his headquarters. David and Jerusalem would be forever linked in Israel's royal theology.

Jerusalem had not been conquered by the 12 tribes of Israel. The Jebusites remained in control of it. David advances with his mercenary army on Jerusalem.

Jerusalem sits at the top of three hills and is easily defended. The Jebusites taunt David, "Even the blind and the lame will turn you back."

According to the NRSV translation, David tells his army to strike the water shaft, cutting off the city's water supply, then attack the lame and the blind whom David hates. This is a difficult passage and some of the text appears to be missing. Kyle McCarter, a leading scholar of 1 and 2 Samuel, says that a more literal translation is that David was telling his army to attack the windpipe, not the water supply. The intent is to kill the Jebusites instead of maiming them. McDaniel says that this text reflects religious scruples about mutilating human bodies, violating the sanctity of the body.

David seized the city, which is now known as the City of David. David seized it with his private army, without the help of Israel. He shrewdly selected it as his capital city because it lies between Israel and Judah and could be acceptable to both. He could avoid charges of favoritism. It was something like selecting Washington, D.C. as the national capital because it does not lie within the North or the South.

The story ends with a theological conclusion by the Deuteronomist historian who was the final editor of the story: "And David became greater and greater, for the Lord, the God of hosts, was with him."

“The Lord, the God of hosts” looks back to the prayer of Hannah in 1 Samuel 2, when Israel’s hope was associated with the ark of the covenant. Hope now begins with King David. Hope will also come to be found in Jerusalem. This has not yet fully taken place. Jerusalem for now is the city of David. It will not become the holy city where God’s presence is found until Solomon builds the Temple. In Israel’s royal theology, God’s presence will be found not in the ark but in the king and in a holy city.

Third Move: A Christian Royal Theology

These verses seem nondescript, but they are the climax of the rise of David that begins at 1 Samuel 5. We have waded through chapters of tribal warfare and revenge killings. Brothers and cousins have cuts off each other’s arms and legs and heads. Immediately after this chapter, we will read of the conquest of the Philistines and a revolt by David’s son, Absalom. Through all of this, David shows love and respect for Saul and Absalom and devotion to God.

This is the brief shining moment in Camelot. Liz Barrington Forney, a Presbyterian minister, writes in *Feasting on the Word* that this is “an incredible miracle of healing in the Old Testament. It is the healing of the nations. It is the healing of the people of God as a whole.” It is also the healing of David, who has been in exile. It is testimony to the power of God to find a way when there seems to be no way. In a fragmented world, it is a miracle of unification.

The miracle of unity for Christians also takes place through royal theology. Christ is our king and the table is our holy place. Christ is a different type of king. He is not a warrior who delivers us in battle from our enemies. He is a savior who delivers us from brokenness. The king is anointed by each of us when we confess that Jesus is Lord and Savior of the World. The holy place is more like the tabernacle that moves with the people. Wherever the bread and the cup are shared, that is where we find the presence of God.

The unity of all Christians is a central belief of Disciples of Christ. It truly is a miracle when people come together on something. Denominations seem to be splintering and shrinking. I can’t even imagine a miracle that would end the partisan politics that separates people, not only in the United States but also in Europe.

Unity is even harder today in our age of individualism. We no longer think of ourselves as sheep who are totally dependent on their leader. The model of a king does not sit well with people who hold democratic ideals sacred.

Disciples of Christ are a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world. That sounds good. How do we model wholeness?

It begins with our shared belief that Jesus is the Christ, the son of the living God. The Christ is the anointed one, the one who shows us what God in the flesh is like. He doesn't lead by command. He leads by challenging us with parables, asking us to ponder how the kingdom of God could be like a woman searching for lost coins. Jesus points not to himself but to God as king. He asks us to consider our part in the kingdom, comparing us to the Prodigal Son who comes to his senses and returns to the father.

What David and Jesus share is a devotion to God. David turns to God before he makes major decisions. Jesus goes to lonely places to pray to find communion with God. God is the ground of being who unites all of us, if only we will turn to God.

The miracle of unity takes place when people stop putting their own interests first and look for God in others. That is not just how a healthy church works, it is how a healthy democracy works.

In honor of the Fourth of July, I read John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*. He believes freedom of expression helps us find truth through vigorous debate. No one has a grasp of the whole truth, only partial truth. If people listen to a vigorous debate, they will be drawn to a truth that melds valid points from conflicting points of view.

That is what ruling by consensus is all about. Churches are abandoning the corporate model of governance with Robert's *Rules of Order* and making decisions by consensus. Small churches tend to do that anyway. We have ruled by consensus since I have been here. We don't move forward unless all hearts are clear.

That means that when making decisions, we hear everyone's point of view and consider it. If you disagree, you have an affirmative duty to come forward and speak your mind. We each have an affirmative duty to listen to each other and hear each other out. Once all viewpoints have been fully discussed, the group moves forward with a decision. If your perspective has been heard, your heart is clear. You go along with and support the decision of the group, even if the group goes a different direction than you would.

We had a year-long discernment process when we became an open and affirming congregation. We had a congregational meeting/pizza party in which we went around the room and asked each person to tell about their experiences with a close family member or friend who was gay. We later voted by secret ballot. The vote was 22-0. That is amazing for a secret ballot on a divisive issue that was tearing apart other churches.

We are going through a similar process now as we decide on a future direction for the church, whether we should sell a few acres and build a new sanctuary on the

road and go through training to be a new church start. You have a duty to come forward with your thoughts.

Compare our consensus model with debates in politics. Raw power by the majority is all that matters. There is little or no attempt to discern the truth. The ruling leadership in all our state legislatures and in Congress imposes its will on the people. It leaves the minority upset because their opinions have been disregarded. They are like a king who takes. It never makes for a lasting peace.

Lasting peace comes from God. It comes from recognizing that communion with God builds us up, that each of us is a child of God and that our community is stronger if each of us shares our gifts.

Conclusion

There is still a place for royal theology today. Israel's royal theology understood that God was present in the king and in a holy city. Jesus democratizes the royal theology. Jesus helps each of us recognize that God is present in us and in each other. It is that awareness of God that makes unity possible.

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