

SERMON TITLE: “A Tale of Two Davids”

TEXT: 2 Samuel 5:1-5, 9-10

PREACHED AT: Highland Community Church (Abbotsford)

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It’s a real treat to be back at Highland. We were here almost three years ago and very much appreciated the warm welcome and the privilege of worshiping with you then. And, of course, Highland is one of those places that kind of stays on my radar because of J and Andrea and their family’s presence here.

So, you have been spending some time with David in the books of Samuel.

Our community back in Lethbridge took a break from the Lectionary readings a few weeks ago in order to begin a summer series, so we have not been reading the texts from Samuel.

I did some catching up on the story this past week to kind of get my bearings, to get reacquainted with the story of David and what had led up to where we find ourselves this morning which is a kind of coronation scene where David finally is anointed king over all of Israel (as opposed to just Judah, which he had been for 7 years).

What I discovered was that our text this morning represents the culmination of a long story and a promise. This is the fulfillment of events that began way back in 1 Samuel 16 where the little shepherd boy was chosen as the Lord’s anointed.

And then I read even further back in the story and recalled that the Lord’s choosing of David must also be read in the context of the kingship very much being option B in God’s plan, an accommodation to Israel’s wanting to be like the other nations (1 Samuel 8) and of their rejection of YHWH as their one true king.

And so, as I was reading the back-story to our text today and as I read and reread the text itself, it seemed to me that of the many themes that came out, one of the most prominent

had to do with the nature of power and leadership and how these are to be exercised among the people of God.

I thought that one way of approaching the text today would be to contrast the stories of two Davids—the David of the books of Samuel, and another David I met a few months ago.

I hope that you will permit me a bit of latitude this morning as I will be focusing less on the specifics of the text itself than on how it stands for the broader narrative of David himself and, broader still, some themes of how God works in the world at large.

This past April, I had the privilege of being a part of an MCC pastors learning tour to Colombia. Our role was to observe and to learn about how MCC, in partnership with Anabaptist churches in the country, are accompanying Colombians and working with them to address the many challenges that they face.

The big overarching reality that stands behind MCC's work in this region is that of the massive number of Internally Displaced People (IDP) in Colombia.

Current estimates put the number of IDPs in Colombia at around 5 million people—approaching an eighth of the total population, and the highest number of any nation on earth. The overwhelming majority of these IDPs are small farmers (*campesinos*) who have, through a variety of methods, been forced from their farmland by various armed groups and/or large corporations (over 50% of which, are Canadian, incidentally) looking to put the land to other uses (usually either big agribusiness, mining [gold, zinc, platinum], or palm-oil production).

Many of these *campesinos* and their families end up in or around Bogotá living in extremely difficult circumstances of material poverty, neglect (from all levels of government), violence, and vulnerability to the many and varied armed groups that continue to be influential in Colombia.

Our group had the opportunity to visit a hillside region south of Bogotá called Cazucá where one of the largest settlements of displaced *campesinos* currently reside. It was a sobering visit to put it mildly and is one of the experiences of the trip that stands out the most to me.

I had never observed, firsthand, the kind of poverty that I saw there. I had never heard, firsthand, the kind of stories that I heard here. I have never felt such an overwhelming sense of profound sadness mixed with rage that I felt as I watched a little girl aimlessly walking barefoot through the labyrinth of mud and garbage and dog feces and debris that is everywhere in Cazucá... Or as we heard about a little boy who couldn't walk properly due to malnutrition... Or as we were told about teenagers who are targeted for recruitment by guerilla groups and then terrorized or even murdered if they take a wrong step... Or as we listened to a man explain how he was trying to use crude plastic pipes to divert the rainwater and mud away from his precarious shack patched together from tin and wood because the government refused to provide even the most basic of infrastructure for this "illegal" community... Or as an MCC worker told us the story of the older man who had seen three of his daughters murdered due to his involvement in land disputes...

So many heartbreaking stories of cruelty, violence, suffering, injustice, dehumanization, and systematic and deliberate neglect of the most vulnerable of people.

At one point, we were visiting a project called "El Progreso," which was jointly funded by the Mennonite Brethren Church, MCC, and private donors.

Here, we met a man named David who, with his wife and two children, lived in Cazucá and devoted most of his time and energy to running El Progreso. Like many other projects in Cazucá, it was part church, part daycare, part soup kitchen, part community college (they offered sewing and computer classes there), part library, and more.

Pastor David was a soft-spoken man but was happy to tell us about El Progreso, and to answer any of our questions. At one point, we began to express an interest in *his* story. We knew that he had voluntarily chosen to live and work in this place. We knew that he had chosen to bring his wife and children to live in a context of violence and poverty and suffering.

Why? At one point, I asked David if there was some event or experience that he could point to that had convinced him to come to a place like this.

He looked at me, and said, “Well, I think I read the same Bible you do. And the Bible I read tells me that Jesus emptied himself and became nothing to serve and love others. I’m not Jesus, but I’m trying to imitate him.”

Talk about a sobering moment.

We later heard more of David’s story. He came from the city of Bogotá, which has a six-strata system of labeling neighbourhoods and regions of the city for tax purposes. Regions that are designated “Strata 6” are the wealthiest ones and pay the most tax. Regions designated “Strata 1” are the poorest regions and, consequently, pay the least tax.

David had come from a Strata 6 neighbourhood. He had a career as a model where he made a lot of money. All of his family continued to live there—they thought he was crazy for doing what he had done. Cazucá wasn’t even a Strata 1—it wasn’t even classified. It would probably be a zero.

David’s story was one of downward mobility of the profoundest kind. David had left a life of luxury and opulence for a life of living and working with the forgotten, the misunderstood, the neglected.

David’s was a story of moving from a position of wealth and privilege and power to one of poverty, powerlessness, and an almost complete lack of status.

David had gone from the top to the bottom because of his conviction that this was what following the crucified one entailed.

Back to our other David...

Our text from 2 Samuel 5 represents the climax of a very different trajectory. Rather than moving from the top to the bottom, David's journey was from the bottom to the top.

Back in 1 Samuel 16 and following, we see how the Lord chose David. David was the youngest and least impressive of Jesse's sons—the “runt of the litter,” as J put it during conversation yesterday. There were other far more obvious choices for the position of “Lord's Anointed One.”

But after marching Jesse's seven sons past the prophet Samuel, the LORD says these famous words:

The LORD does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart. (1 Samuel 16:7)

Despite (or perhaps because of) David's humble origins, he rises to become Israel's greatest king—the one who, much later in the biblical story, the Apostle Paul would describe as a “man after God's own heart” (Acts 3:22). The humble shepherd boy becomes the one associated with the most glorious period of Israel's history—a time when the tribes that had previously been feuding and divided in their loyalties between Saul and David are united for the first time as one nation under one king.

But what kind of king?

It's worth noting that 2 Samuel 5:2 explicitly refers to David as the one who will "shepherd" his people. One commentator had this to say about the importance of the word "shepherd" in this text:

By naming David "shepherd" in the act of anointing him king, the elders subtly rehabilitate the word "king." Saul had fairly ruined the word during his reign—he took it as a license to set himself up as sovereign in place of God, bullying instead of blessing. The kingship in Israel was never meant to usurp the kingship of God... By setting "king" in a field of meaning dominated by "shepherd," the word king comes to be understood as a kind of shepherd; his rule, in terms of care. The words we choose and the way we used them affect the way we think and the lives we live: king, yes; but in the context of shepherd.

David wasn't perfect. *God knows David wasn't perfect.* 2 Samuel 10-20 lays out David's sin in all of its sordid detail. The story of David's rise to the kingship of Israel is not an unambiguous, whitewashed story of moral heroism, by any means. David's famous adultery with Bathsheba and subsequent murder of her husband Uriah is the most obvious of these, but there are other signs as well.

Our text this morning represents a kind of hinge in Israel's story and David's story. Prior to this, David's journey is marked mostly by simple trust in Yahweh, but once David becomes king of both Israel and Judah the story gets more complicated. According to OT scholar Walter Brueggemann,

The story now becomes more complex and ambiguous. The power of faithfulness and trust endures, but the story now includes much more ruthless military consolidation and self-preoccupation. The David who was content to receive gifts now becomes a David who grasps at power. As we reach the end of the story of David's rise, we seem also to reach the end of David's unambiguous trust and faithfulness.

David was hardly the first, nor will he be the last person to struggle with the temptations of power and status.

And yet... As the rest of 2 Samuel will make clear, David was the closest Israel would ever come to the ideal king—the representative of YHWH on earth.

At his best, David knew that his power was a derivative power, that it was not absolute, that God alone was the king of Israel.

At his best, David was a man who could admit when he was wrong. The same man who was overcome by desire in the story of Bathsheba penned the famous words of Psalm 51, “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.”

At his best, David lived and ruled from a posture of humility and out of a conviction that “king” was to be understood and exercised in the context of “shepherd.”

Like virtually every other figure in the biblical narrative, David resists any attempts that we might make to create a whitewashed man of virtue. David has a dark side, as we all do.

But the story of David’s rise to power does also represent a common motif found repeatedly throughout Scripture—that of God calling and empowering people of humble and unlikely origins to accomplish his purposes in the world.

So, two Davids with two different trajectories.

The first David moves from the top to the bottom, willingly giving up power and prestige to live a life of solidarity and service to the poor. The second David moves from the bottom to the top and, despite struggling with the temptations of power, becomes the closest thing the nation of Israel has ever had to an ideal king.

What can we learn from these two stories?

As Anabaptist followers of Jesus, one of our convictions is that all of Scripture ought to be read through a Christo-centric lens. This simply means that we unapologetically read the earlier parts of the Bible through what we know about the person and work of Jesus Christ.

We are always asking ourselves, does this text point to Jesus? How?

When we do this, it becomes immediately apparent that Jesus—the Son of David, the fulfillment of God’s promise *to* David—is the one who embodies what is most good and true about the trajectories of both Davids.

Jesus is the one who relinquishes the ultimate position of privilege—divinity!—in order to identify with and to redeem humanity. The fancy theological word for this is *kenosis* which means something like “self-emptying.” Paul puts this famously in Philippians 2:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, **6**who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, **7** but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, **8** he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross.

Jesus goes from the top to the bottom for our sake, demonstrating that it is through “weakness” and “foolishness” that our healing comes.

Like King David, though, Jesus also goes from the bottom to the top. Jesus’ humble origins are well known: born in a feed trough to a frightened teenager in a backwater, insignificant part of Israel, most of his life spent among the poor and the outcasts, disciples recruited from the most unlikely of ranks—fishermen, tax collectors, etc.

Jesus was familiar with being rejected for his perceived status. The gospel text for today is from Mark 6:

On the Sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, "Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands!

Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him.

In other words, "we know who this man is and where he comes from, and we know what is possible for him. We know what prophets look like, and this isn't it.

Yet, despite Jesus' rejection by many, despite his cruel execution on a Roman cross, we know that God vindicated him by raising him from the dead. The second part of the passage from Philippians we just read says this:

9 Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, **10** so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, **11** and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

I remember Darrell Johnson, my former professor at Regent College and current pastor at First Baptist Vancouver, saying that whenever we see a "therefore" in Scripture we should ask, "What is the 'therefore' there for?"

In this case, I think the "therefore" is meant to point to a causal connection between self-emptying and exaltation.

It is *because* Jesus emptied himself and took on lowly status that God exalted him.

The same is true on a much different scale for the David I met in Colombia, I think.

There is an amazing power that comes with being willing to give up power. In rejecting a life of privilege and entitlement to live a life with and for the poor, David had an influence and respect among the people that he served that he could not have gotten any other way.

Similarly, the David of the books of Samuel was at his strongest and his most faithful when he did not grasp after power or manipulate situations to preserve and fortify it.

We see traces of this throughout his life. Even though God had chosen him, he refused to take the kingship from Saul by force, even though he had opportunities to do so. And in our text today, it is the elders of Israel who approach David to offer him kingship. David does not unilaterally assume leadership; rather he makes a *covenant* with the elders of Israel—a gesture that implies at least *some* level of mutuality.

And, God honours David for this, as we see in verses 9-10:

And David became greater and greater, for the Lord, the God of hosts, was with him.

Often sermons do one of two things: they tell us what to do or what to believe. I have long preferred a third option: Sermons can help us learn more about the kind of story we are a part of.

What do the stories of these two Davids disclose about the nature of the story that *we* are a part of, as followers of Jesus all these years later?

There are two themes that I think the stories of these two Davids invite us to consider in closing:

1. Power and status work differently in the divine economy—for “important” people like kings, and for everyone else.

There is no one so low that they cannot be raised up and there is no one so high that they cannot be brought down.

I think we ought to be thankful for both of these truths.

If we feel worthless or insignificant, if we come from the “wrong places” and associate with the “wrong people,” we can derive confidence and strength from the fact that God has always seemed pleased to use unlikely people. Shepherd boys. Unwed mothers. Prostitutes. Self-righteous Pharisees. Fishermen. The list could go on and on right down to the present.

We follow a “leveling God”—a God who dignifies and honours the lowly and humbles the proud.

Similarly, if we are feeling quite pleased with ourselves and our accomplishments or our lineage or influence, or... whatever, we can probably look forward to an opportunity to learn humility.

This opportunity may come voluntarily (as it did with Colombian David) or it may not (as was occasionally the case with King David). But sooner or later, the way of Christ will involve self-emptying.

2. Who do we esteem? And why?

The Lord does not look on appearances but at the heart. We usually do things exactly the other way around.

We live in a culture obsessed with celebrity and status and outward appearance. Our is a culture where someone can be, as social theorist Daniel Boorstin put it, “famous for being well-known.”

Yet God is not impressed by what impresses us. God is impressed by hearts and minds and lives that are faithful and true, that are open to being surprised by people, that are open to developing eyes and ears to see and hear traces of God and his upside down ways of working in the world.

God is impressed by people who live out of a conviction that things are not always what they seem in our strange and beautiful world... that strength comes out of weakness and self-donation, that weakness is often revealed in the exercise of power... That impressive things can be done by people from unimpressive places and backgrounds, and that people from impressive places can achieve true greatness by giving themselves away.

May God grace us with the courage and the conviction and the imagination to see and to embrace the upside down nature of power and status in God’s economy.

May God help us to be impressed by the right things for the right reasons for the sake of the world he loves.

Amen.