

SERMON TITLE: “Behold, Your King!”

TEXT: 2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16; Romans 16:25-27

PREACHED AT: Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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DATE: December 18, 2011/4th Sunday of Advent

We have arrived at the last Sunday of Advent. Next Sunday is Christmas day, the day we celebrate the arrival of Jesus, the king of kings.

This is the time of year when our hearts and minds turn to focus on the Christ child. Our season of waiting is nearly complete—Christmas signals the arrival of this baby boy who would fulfill the hope of Israel.

This time of year is all about Jesus.

So, perhaps you are wondering about our text this morning. We have hit the rewind button today, and are all the way back in the book of 2 Samuel. We are around a thousand years *before* the birth of Christ! Instead of Jesus, we are talking about Nathan and David and building projects.

Perhaps this seems like a strange text for the Sunday before Christmas, but I think it tells an important part of the story of Christmas and, more importantly, the story that Christmas fulfills and the story that Christmas makes possible.

So, let’s set the stage. As I said, we are somewhere in the vicinity of a thousand years before Christ. Our passage takes place at the end of a long and complicated relationship between David and Saul, the first king of Israel.

David has been “king in waiting” for a long time, but Saul has been unwilling to pass on his crown. Saul has even tried to kill David! But David has been patient and, eventually, in a battle with the Philistines, Saul takes his own life.

David then narrowly averts a civil war and finally unites all of Israel under his rule. He either defeats or wins over those loyal to Saul; he defeats the Jebusites and conquers the city of Jerusalem, and brings the Ark of the Covenant to the city.

(Remember, the ark was a chest containing the tablets of stone that the Ten Commandments were written on, which traveled with the Israelites through the desert from Sinai onwards, and which symbolized the presence of God with his people. For the Israelites, the ark was where God dwelled.)

So, David has accomplished quite a lot, and our text from 2 Samuel 7 says that when he was settled in his house, and when he had rest from war, it occurred to him that perhaps he ought to build God a more impressive residence as well.

At first, the prophet Nathan tells him to go ahead and build a house for God, but then God comes to Nathan in a vision and basically says, “Have I ever asked for more elaborate accommodations?” The answer, obviously is “no.”

But the really remarkable part of the story is what follows.

God doesn't give David a list of instructions for how to give him what he *really* wants. Instead, God tells David what HE will do for HIM.

God will bless David, he will make his name great, he will give his people a safe place to live, he will give them peace.

And then, to make the surprise complete, he says to David, “Moreover the LORD declares to you that the LORD will make you a house.”

This passage and the verses that follow are what is known as the “**Davidic Covenant**” which is a fancy term for the fact that here God establishes David and his descendants as the rightful kings of Judah from whom the Messiah would come.

So far, so good. We know that one of Jesus' names was “Son of David. We know that Jesus proceeds from David's lineage, and that he is the Messiah that Israel's prophets spoke of.

But do we know just how strange this fulfillment really is? Do we appreciate just how unusual a king Jesus is and was?

To begin with, we need to look at the institution of kingship in Israel's history.

Way back with Moses in Deuteronomy, we read these words:

¹⁴ When you enter the land the LORD your God is giving you and have taken possession of it and settled in it, and you say, “Let us set a king over us like all the nations around us,” ¹⁵ be sure to appoint over you the king the LORD your God chooses. He must be from among your own people. Do not place a foreigner over you, one who is not an Israelite. ¹⁶ The king, moreover, must not acquire great numbers of horses for himself or make the people return to Egypt to get more of them, for the LORD has told you, “You are not to go back that way again.” ¹⁷ He must not take many wives, or his heart will be led astray. He must not accumulate large amounts of silver and gold.

A little bit later, in 1 Samuel 8, we see very clearly what God thinks about earthly kingship. It's a longer passage, but worth reading in its entirety:

⁴ So all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah. ⁵They said to him, “You are old, and your sons do not follow your ways; now appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have.” ⁶ But when they said, “Give us a king to lead us,” this displeased Samuel; so he prayed to the LORD. ⁷ And the LORD told him: “Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king. ⁸ As they have done from the day I brought them up out of Egypt until this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are doing to you. ⁹ Now listen to them; but warn them solemnly and let them know what the king who will reign over them will claim as his rights.”

¹⁰ Samuel told all the words of the LORD to the people who were asking him for a king. ¹¹ He said, “This is what the king who will reign over you will claim as his rights: He will take your sons and make them serve with his chariots and horses, and they will run in front of his chariots. ¹² Some he will assign to be commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and others to plow his ground and reap his harvest, and still others to make weapons of war and equipment for his chariots. ¹³ He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. ¹⁴ He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive groves and give them to his attendants. ¹⁵ He will take a tenth of your grain and of your vintage and give it to his officials and attendants. ¹⁶ Your male and female servants and the best of your cattle and donkeys he will take for his own use. ¹⁷ He will take a tenth of your flocks, and you yourselves will become his slaves. ¹⁸ When that day comes, you will cry out for relief from the king you have chosen, but the LORD will not answer you in that day.”

¹⁹ But the people refused to listen to Samuel. “No!” they said. “We want a king over us. ²⁰ Then we will be like all the other nations, with a king to lead us and to go out before us and fight our battles.”

²¹ When Samuel heard all that the people said, he repeated it before the LORD. ²² The LORD answered, “Listen to them and give them a king.”

This is the backdrop to God’s promise to David in our text today.

Before the crowning of Israel’s first king, we see that God does not think highly of human kings.

We see that God knows the darkness that resides in even the best of human hearts, and that he knows that Israel’s kings will give in to the same temptations that all earthly kings have given in to, from Saul and David right down to Gaddafi and Hussein and [pick your modern ruler].

At times, we are tempted to whitewash the characters and stories of the Bible, but they are profoundly human in the best and worst senses of the term.

This week, I read a good chunk of the books of Samuel and was struck by the context that surrounds this statement of the covenant made between God and David.

It is bloody and violent. It is full of cynical political maneuvering as the transition from the kingship of Saul to the kingship of David takes place. There is family conflict. There is horrific and gruesome vengeance, sometimes taken by David himself (2 Sam. 4:9-12).

There is sexual scandal—only a few chapters after David receives the news from Nathan that God will establish his house forever, he is committing adultery with Bathsheba (2 Sam. 11:1-13) and plotting the death of her husband (2 Sam. 11:14-27). Even the “man after God’s own heart” is corrupted by power.

David will do much that is good. He will be Israel’s best king, but he will also behave in precisely the ways outlined in the book of Deuteronomy and in 1 Samuel.

But perhaps the most important thing we see—again, before Israel’s first king is ever crowned, is that Israel’s request for an earthly king is a rejection of God as their king.

God’s promise to make David’s line great, to honour his name, and to establish his throne forever, must be understood in light of the fact that a human king was always plan B for God.

It was always a concession, a grudging accommodation to their stubbornness and hardheartedness, their desire to be like the other nations, their determination to choose their own way, even when it is a way that leads only to pain and frustration, and **their refusal to accept God as their only true king.**

Of course, we know more of the story than David or Nathan did.

We know that David’s earthly kingdom would not last. David reigned during the most stable times of the nation of Israel’s history, but after his son Solomon (the child of David & Bathsheba), the kingdom would be fractured and divided and never united again.

David’s people would be conquered and exiled and oppressed and mistreated by a variety of superpowers, whether Assyria, Persia, or Rome.

And the Messiah out of David's line? Well, he would come not to a mighty kingdom enjoying peace and rest, but to an occupied nation of exiles under the thumb of the mighty Romans.

The event we will celebrate next Sunday is God coming once again as king, to a people who had rejected him, to a people who had always longed for more impressive and powerful kings.

The God who did not seem troubled to live in a tent, would now take up residence in another shabby dwelling—a trough used to feed livestock.

The God who moved from place to place with his nomad people in the wilderness would one day proclaim, “Foxes have holes and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head” (Luke 9:58).

The people who had always longed for a king would get a king, but a king who acted in very un-kingly ways:

- A king who rode into his city on a donkey instead of a warhorse (Mat. 21:1-11)
- A king who, rather than clinging obsessively and fearfully to power (like King Herod) would submit to the powers of the day and let them do their worst to him on a Roman cross (Luke 23)
- A king who refused political power and resisted people's attempts to make him the kind of king they wanted and expected (John 6:14-15)
- A king who would serve and suffer for his subjects rather than dominate and take from and control them (Luke 22:24-26)

This strange God—a God who has no need of impressive structures or a fixed address—returns to his people as the king they need, even if not the king they *wanted* or *expected*, and keeps the promise made to David a millennium earlier.

And in so doing, he reorients our understanding of power and kingship. He reorders his people's conceptions and expectations of how God works.

He does the same for us.

Perhaps we, too, long for a more impressive king this Advent season.

The question for us is the same as the one that was presented to Israel during Samuel's day, and the same one that was presented to the people of Palestine when Jesus arrived on the scene a thousand years later:

Will we accept our true king?

Or will we reject him for worldly alternatives?

God way of working is very often unexpected, unpredictable, perhaps even unsettling and disorienting, but it is **better** and **safer** and **truer** than the alternatives.

For God is much more trustworthy than human beings. And God keeps his covenants.

The opening lines of Matthew's gospel introduce Jesus as the "Son of David" and the "Son of Abraham."

God honours the covenant he made with David by giving him an eternal kingdom, but one that goes far beyond national boundaries and physical land.

He honours another covenant made with Abraham (Genesis 12) that through Abraham's descendants, God would bless *all* the nations of the earth.

We are the result of this promise.

Israel's strange and unexpected king represents the widening of God's story, the expansion of his kingdom beyond the nation of Israel to include the Gentiles—you and me!

This is what Paul speaks of at the end of his long letter to the church in Rome—our second text this morning. This is the "mystery hidden for long ages past."

Paul goes to great lengths in this letter to show how God's promises to Israel are not void, but that they have been expanded to include the Gentiles (Romans 9-10).

We are the beneficiaries of this unexpected fulfillment of promises made so long ago—promises to Abraham and David.

May God help us, throughout the Christmas season and into the coming year, to live lives worthy of this unsettling kingdom, this unsettling king.

May God help us to allow this king who upsets and disorients and confuses and confounds and relentlessly pursues his people to reorder our lives, to teach us what to value and why, that we may be citizens of his strange and beautiful kingdom.

Amen.