

Establishing a Kingdom

2 Samuel 5:1-10; Mark 6:1-13

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All of us human beings are complex, of course. None of us can be reduced to a one-dimensional caricature, easily understood—even predicted—in every circumstance or relationship. People in power often have even more variables, it seems, that make them a mystery not only to the public, but perhaps even to those closest to them. On this 4th of July weekend, people in both political parties are scratching their heads, trying to understand Sarah Palin’s sudden resignation as governor of Alaska. And over the past several weeks, have you been cringing whenever the governor of South Carolina decides to speak publicly? I have the feeling his family cringes every time, too. I know I did a week or so ago when he compared himself to King David.

Apparently this is not a new comparison for a politician. I’ve been reading a book about another very complex public person: Andrew Jackson, the 7th President of the United States. The book, *American Lion*, is by Jon Meacham, who says Jackson was “the most contradictory of men.” He was the first President who did not come from the educated elite, but was a common man of the people. Yet this “common man” was also an unrepentant holder of slaves. He was a fearless warrior, yet a devoted and tender husband. He ripped Native Americans from their ancient territories, yet he also brought an orphaned Native American boy into his home and raised him as his own son. Andrew Jackson was a lifelong Presbyterian who knew the scriptures well. At one point, he likened his enemies to “the uncircumcised Philistines” and said that in battle, his enemies would find themselves head to head with “a David who trusts in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” Meacham rightly notes that Jackson’s comparison of himself to King David gives us a glimpse of the heroic vision he had of himself. David was, Meacham writes, a man who “rose from obscurity to secure his nation and protect his people. A formidable soldier, he was a man of greatness and of God who was not without sin or sadness...”ⁱ

That certainly describes the life of David, doesn’t it? He began in obscurity down south in little Bethlehem...the eighth son of Jesse, who was shooed out of the house to watch over sheep in an outlying field. Yet, the prophet Samuel secretly anointed him as the future king of Israel. And this young boy slew Goliath—that Philistine enemy. We read both of those stories together on previous Sundays.

Last week, while you and I were in Corinth concerned with a New Testament collection for the poor in Jerusalem...back in the Old Testament there was turmoil. Saul

and all of his sons, including the beloved Jonathan, were killed in battle. David was in grief.

This week, we return to David's story. While the rest of the world around us is preoccupied (or *obsessed*) with the "king of pop," 2 Samuel 5 brings us the story of David becoming king of all Israel. It has been a slow rise to power. After that secret anointing back in 1 Samuel 16, a lot of time goes by. Then, in 2 Samuel 2, David's hometown crowd in the south names him as their king. By chapter 5, even the north, Saul's hometown crowd, anoints him as their king, too. "You," they say emphatically, "you it was you all along who were our true king, even when Saul was alive." David's life has come full circle: the shepherd boy, now grown, becomes the shepherd king of all Israel. David is 30 or maybe 37 years old...and he will rule for a remarkable 40 years. But, as Meacham said, this "man of greatness and of God...was not without sin or sadness."

The stories of David's sin and sadness will be told on other Sundays, but even here on this remarkable day of coronation and celebration, there is a hint that David is not simply the one-dimensional caricature of the greatest king who ever lived. There is an obscure reference in this passage that makes us wonder, perhaps, about David's character and his faithfulness. David lived his earlier vulnerable years faithfully, trusting in God at every turn and twist. But here David begins to gain power, and with it no small measure of glory that proves costly for other people.

After promising to be a shepherd king, that is one who will watch over the people, care for them and protect them; and after making a covenant with the elders from the north, an agreement that calls them into a relationship of mutuality and care, David decides he needs a place to call home. This undisputed king of an undivided nation needs a new capital city for a new start. Not somewhere in the south or somewhere in the north, but a brand new location, one without old loyalties.

It kind of reminds me of the new start the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) wanted to make when the northern and southern Presbyterian denominations finally reunited. We had been split since the Civil War. The northern church headquarters were in New York City. The southern church headquarters were here in Atlanta. After reunion, where would the new headquarters of our new church be located? Somewhere without old loyalties or advantages that favored one side or another. Somewhere new to symbolize the new beginning, so full of promise and hope. Our denominational headquarters would be in Louisville, a mid-point between the north and the south. Of course, a new location did not exactly fix a church and a people with the same old propensities for disagreements and dissensions, but it was a good try.

David tried, too. He set his eye on a city inhabited by the Jebusites. It was perfect (except, of course, for those Jebusites): it was centrally located in David's new kingdom and neither the north nor the south had any prior claim or attachment to it; it was built on a hill, making it more secure from attacks; and it already had buildings and an infrastructure in place. The city was called *Jerusalem*. Here, for the first time, that beloved name enters the Bible.ⁱⁱ And it enters connected with the beloved name, *David*. Soon the two will be inseparable as Jerusalem comes to be known as *the City of David*.

Jerusalem may have been named after one of the Jebusite gods, "Shalem," but that sounded enough like the Hebrew word for peace/wholeness, *shalom*, that in time that understanding of its name would take precedence.

But establishing David's new kingdom would require, of course, ousting, or at least defeating, people who already lived there.

It is not entirely clear how David did it, but it seems he and his mercenaries either cut off the water supply into the city from outside its walls. Or they climbed up the water shaft itself which ran underneath the city walls and up into the city. But whichever way it happened, there wasn't much of a struggle. David easily conquered Jerusalem. What leaves us and biblical scholars, too, uncomfortable about all of this is what David says about "the blind and lame." Maybe those Jebusites started it, saying that their city was so secure they could put "the blind and lame" in charge of homeland security and David still couldn't get in. But David takes it too far, saying he "hates" the blind and the lame. Ordering them to be attacked, and then decreeing that the blind and the lame should be excluded—the most vulnerable of people in society. Even if we allow for Iron Age insensitivity, it seems like a pretty ruthless way to establish a kingdom that intends to be faithful to God.

It is, of course, no accident that this passage is paired with our reading today from Mark 6, where a different kind of kingdom is being established by Jesus. The contrast could not be more stark. David is hailed as a great king by his own people, while Jesus is rejected even as a prophet by his own hometown crowd. David establishes a great kingdom and a seat of power in Jerusalem. Jesus' kingdom is being established by people who go out into little villages and towns, without anything but a staff and a pair of sandals. And Jerusalem will be the very place where Jesus lays down his power. David's kingdom begins in violence and exclusion of the lame and the blind. Jesus' kingdom is concerned with healing, making whole, and including, placing at the center, really, the most vulnerable: those who are blind, lame, gripped by mental torment; those who are sick, least, lost, or excluded because of their livelihood or lifestyle.

The Bible itself takes that unpromising beginning for Jerusalem and continuously builds toward an expansive vision until the Jerusalem of David's beginning become the new Jerusalem described by Isaiah and Revelation alike. A place where God will dwell in the midst of us, wiping away every tear from our eyes...putting to an end, finally, pain and mourning and death.

As Old Testament scholar, Bruce Birch puts it: "If David's city begins with exclusion of the lame and the blind, that is not where it ends. It expands to become inclusive of all human hopes and possibilities." It is a good reminder for all of us, he says, that our own modest places and plans must always serve and be judged by this larger vision and intention of God kingdom, of the new Jerusalem.ⁱⁱⁱ

Today, we will commission in Jesus' name some of our members. They will go out from this community of faith into villages and towns of Puerto Rico. They are going not in a spirit of conquest or with exclusive ideas and aims. They are going in the spirit of God's larger vision for a different kind of kingdom than the kingdoms we are still constructing and defending in this world. In ways that may seem small or modest by some standards, they intend to participate in something very large. By hammering, or painting, or playing with children, or cooking and sharing food, they will take part in the kingdom God is establishing. They will help to bring some relief from demons that still torment people today: poverty, hunger, and hopelessness. And in turn, these sent disciples will also be enriched, fed, made more whole, and included by those whom they will meet. Surely one of the purposes of all mission in Christ's name is to put an end to every form of exclusion on all sides. To make sure there is room and respect for everyone in the kingdom our God is establishing among us.

What better way to send them out from us, then, than by gathering at this table, where power is redefined and no one is excluded and all are served and fed and made whole. It is this larger vision of the kingdom God is already establishing in our midst that we must always serve and be judged by.

Amen.

ⁱ Jon Meacham, **American Lion: Andrew Jackson in the White House** (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2009), 17.

ⁱⁱ Though Jerusalem was already well attested to in other writings from Egypt or the Elba archives, dating as far back as 2500 B.C.E.

ⁱⁱⁱ Birch, 1239.