

**Series Title: “The Monarchy is a Mixed Bag”**

**19 July 2015: 8<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost**

FUMC—Arlington, TX 76011

“Are you the One . . . ?”—Preaching Text: 2 Samuel 7:1-14a

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“The more I know about business, the more I’m convinced that it is conducted in homes  
and churches far more than in office buildings”

(Laura Moncur, Merriton: Twelve Hours from San Francisco).

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Hear the day’s lesson, 2 Samuel 7:1-14a:

7 Now when the king was settled in his house and the Lord had given him rest from all his enemies around him, 2 the king said to the prophet Nathan, “See now, I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent.” 3 Nathan said to the king, “Go, do all that you have in mind; for the Lord is with you.” 4 But that same night the word of the Lord came to Nathan: 5 Go and tell my servant David:

Thus says the Lord: Are you the one to build me a house to live in? 6 I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle. 7 Wherever I have moved about among all the people of Israel, did I ever speak a word with any of the tribal leaders of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, “Why have you not built me a house of cedar?” 8 Now therefore thus you shall say to my servant David: Thus says the Lord of hosts: I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep to be prince over my people Israel; 9 and I have been with you wherever you went, and have cut off all your enemies from before you; and I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth.

10 And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may live in their own place, and be disturbed no more; and evildoers shall afflict them no more, as formerly, 11 from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel; and I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover the Lord declares to you that the Lord will make you a house. 12 When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. 13 He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. 14 I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me (2 Samuel 7:1-14a).

As our lesson begins King David is in Jerusalem and doing quite well. Yet our passage is a bit confusing unless we know that the conspicuous word translated “house” (consistently *bayith* in Hebrew) has three distinct meanings: 1) palace, 2) temple, and 3) dynasty (or royal house). These fluid understandings of this word “house” create traction by which the writer helps readers understand the theology behind the monarchy—and perhaps why the monarchy is a mixed bag as our series title suggests.

About our story Walter Brueggemann writes: “David’s determination to build God a suitable house is part royal-aggrandizement (increase of power, status, or wealth) and part genuine piety” (Walter Brueggemann, *Interpretation: First and Second Samuel* [Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990], 256-7). Talk about a mixed bag?

The lesson today about David planning to build a house for God connects to the notion of “deuteronomistic theology.” A theological explanation (theology = Greek words that mean “talk about God”) of deuteronomistic “God-talk” is if people are obedient in their covenant with God, then life will go well for them. Conversely, if people disobey God’s command, then punishment follows. Thus, the deuteronomistic historian points to Israel’s unfaithfulness as the reason for the nation’s eventual collapse to Assyria and Babylon. The Israelites often worshipped idols instead of Yahweh even with recurring cautions from the prophets.

Deuteronomistic historians also pointed out Israel’s disobedience not only in the worship of false idols, but likewise putting their King before God. In fact a common phrase in 2 Kings is that he “did evil in the sight of the Lord.” The Deuteronomistic historian seems to employ a “blame the victim” approach in explaining what evil befell Israel (we find deuteronomic material in Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, and Jeremiah).

Near the core of Deuteronomistic history, 2 Samuel 7 ties the threads holding this history together: David’s consolidation of the kingship, the account of a roving ark, and today, God’s covenant with David and descendants. The passage tells us that having won peace and stability, David now decides to do something for God. Yet Yahweh reminds the king that God is chiefly a provider rather than a recipient. It is God who brings David to this moment. David building a “house” for God seems silly in a sense. God clearly jogs David’s memory: God will build a “house” of him. House in this sense is not the house for God as in a temple, but rather house as a dynasty for David and his posterity. As the Brueggemann quote reminds us again: David’s determination to build God a suitable house is part royal-aggrandizement and part genuine piety.

And it is a mixed bag! God's proactive grace is a healing corrective for problematic human ambition—and we, like David, are prone to over-reach!

Of course, most of us want people to display some ambition in life. We like to see initiative and drive in people. When I was pastor in Georgetown I had a few people on the Pastor-Parish Committee that constantly lamented that our custodian did not have any goals in life or any aspirations. They wanted him to take more initiative and be more resourceful. I quickly pointed out that first of all he was an excellent custodian and cared deeply about the church and its building. Second, I told them that if he had any more initiative he would not be our custodian and then we would have to find another. They dropped the subject.

We challenge our children to do well in school because we think and believe if they do, then their determination will offer them opportunities to succeed in life. Yet, sometimes this kind of aspiration can cause us to overreach and in our pride we make mistakes that we ought not to make. David thought he was going to take care of God—and yet God must remind the king that it is God who takes care of David and Israel and . . . well . . . everything else.

Often our pride clouds our judgment and we say and do things that in the big picture are kind of silly. Anthony de Mello offers a superb story that goes like this:

A rich industrialist from the North was horrified to find the Southern fisherman lying lazily beside his boat, smoking a pipe.

"Why aren't you out fishing?" said the industrialist.

"Because I have caught enough fish for the day," said the fisherman.

"Why don't you catch more than you need?" said the industrialist.

"What would I do with more fish?" asked the fisherman.

"You could earn more money," was the reply. "With that you could have a motor fixed to your boat. Then you could go into deeper waters and catch more fish. Then you would make enough to buy nylon nets. These would bring you more fish and more money. Soon you would have enough money to own two boats . . . maybe even a fleet of boats. Then you would be a rich man like me."

"What would I do then?" asked the fisherman.

“Then you could sit down and enjoy life,” said the industrialist.

“What do you think I am doing now?” said the contented fisherman (Anthony de Mello, S. J., *The Song of the Bird*, Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, Anand, India, 1982, pp 170-1).

Ambition usually progresses through the following stages: “be like Dad . . . be famous . . . be a millionaire . . . make enough to pay the bills . . . hang on long enough to draw a pension”

(*Bits & Pieces*, September 1989).

Please do not misunderstand me. David was an ambitious king and that offered his people one of the longest periods of peace and security in Israel’s history. Yet sometimes ambition can be something of an Achilles’ heel for human beings. Without ambition, our lives may become routine and hollow. We need to celebrate ambition and enjoy the better present and future it brings. At the same time it would be good for us to remember that an overweening pride that creates a lusty ambition can make us people who want power and influence at any cost. People who have single minded ambition are those who may be prone to neglect friends. Their just deserts may be loneliness and alienation from their friends.

Note how we talk: “I took Jesus into my heart.” “I accepted God when I was baptized.” No . . . we do not let God into our lives; God takes us into God’s life.

During the last decade of his reign, I wonder how many evenings David ate alone in the palace. It is but a question . . . (1 Samuel 17:29).