

THE THRONE OF DAVID

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2 Samuel 7: 1-11, 16 - God's covenant with David
Luke 1: 26-38 - The birth of Jesus foretold

Thank you By [Reesor] for those readings. The Old Testament reading, known as the Covenant with David, is such a classic. In our Hebrew Bible, in the whole Judeo-Christian tradition, there are several different covenant traditions including of course, a long way back, that with Noah. But two of the principle covenants that are two streams of the tradition of the Hebrew Scriptures are those with David and Moses. That with Moses was made on the mountain with the giving of the Law. The Covenant with David is the one we just heard where, through the prophet, God tells David "I will build you a house." That's a bit of a pun because David was thinking he should build a temple whereas God is actually saying "No; it's not time to do that." (It wasn't until the time of David's son Solomon that the temple was actually built.) God then says "I'll build you a house"--meaning a household, a dynasty, a royal dynasty--"and establish your throne forever." The word "throne" is a very metaphorical term meaning the power and the presence. This Throne of David is the presence of God through this Davidic Covenant.

The language in the New Testament reading, therefore, when the angel appears to Mary and announces the birth of Christ, refers back to the Covenant with David. That Covenant seems to have been lost inasmuch as several hundred years later the last king of David was taken from the throne and there hadn't been a king on the Throne of David for many years. The hope of a "king," which is what "Messiah" means, had been transformed into a spiritualized idea. So when today's reading from Luke speaks of the angel announcing to Mary that this child to be born will be this long awaited king to sit on the Throne of David, the thinking goes way back to that Covenant with David.

It's interesting to me that the motif of fear runs through these stories. The angel appears to Mary and says "Don't be afraid," and of course when he appears to the shepherds they too are afraid and the angel tells them not to be afraid. It's as if people have been taught to be afraid of divine presence--manifestations such as angels. So what is the feeling that goes along with the presence of the sacred?

Today is the fourth Sunday of Advent, when we focus on the theme of love. John talks about the relationship between love and fear. Perfect love drives out all fear. The Covenant with Moses was different from the Covenant with David in that the former had a whole mess of laws. It was a two-way agreement. Here's what God is expecting of you; you must live a faithful life according to these rules and direction; there is a way of life that is crucial to your salvation. The Covenant with David had no laws. It didn't say if you do this and this and that and that, then God will establish your throne forever. It was a completely unconditional promise in contrast with the Covenant with Moses.

These two covenants reflect two different sides of our faith tradition, and they stand in a dialectical tension, a paradoxical relationship. The one side says “we’re saved by our faith alone”--simply by trusting in God--and not by what we do or by what we deserve or by earning anything. The other side of our faith says “faith without works is dead,” and much of our faith has to do with the moral questions about how we shall live. We know that how we live and the choices we make impact on ourselves and our world spiritually. So there’s a contradictory tension there: one side says the love that comes from God is unconditional; the other side says there are some things about how we live that are important. Like many spiritual truths, these two sides exist beyond the limits of our rational reason and so they appear contradictory or paradoxical. But it’s out of the tension of that dichotomy that the energy of our faith arises. So we need to speak about both sides.

Today, however, we’re talking about the side of the Davidic Covenant--the unconditional love and promise of God which is ours simply by opening our hearts and welcoming that sacred presence into our lives and living in trust. Come back next Sunday and we’ll talk about the other side!! That would scare you all away, wouldn’t it?? Perfect love drives out all fear.

If God is a judge who will condemn us for how we have lived, then the presence of God is fearful. And because that motif is there when the Bible talks about the day of the Lord, don’t be so excited about the day of the Lord because it’s going to be a terrible time. Many of the prophets speak that way. The Proverbs talk about the importance of the fear of the Lord. That’s an important motif.

But there is also this: “do not be afraid.” Do not be afraid because there is an expression of God’s love here, and that’s what we are hearing. That’s why it’s a perfect passage to hear on this fourth Sunday of Advent when the theme is love. In this passage God establishes the Throne of David with an unconditional promise of the divine presence and love for all time. That’s the kind of God’s love we celebrate today, and it’s there for us in the face of all the fears of our lives.

Years ago I heard a psychologist talk about fear. He said that, fundamentally, human beings face three kinds of fear in their lives. One is the fear of failure, the second is the fear of death, and the third is the fear of abandonment.

That third one is maybe the one to focus on today. We’re so dependent on our love for one another, on community, on being cared for by each other. The prospect of being left alone, of being utterly abandoned, is one of the deepest fears in the human soul. And that gets expanded beyond our fear of being abandoned or rejected by our loved ones or our colleagues or the people with whom we share life. It expands to the spiritual realm, to the fear of being abandoned by God. One of our deepest fears, that God will leave us, is expressed in the Psalms: My God, hast thou abandoned me, forgotten me? That is the sense that we would be left alone. Our United Church creed focuses especially on that. It starts out by saying: “We are not alone, we live in God’s world.” God is with us. That divine presence is the central message of this birth story of Jesus, the message that Emmanuel--meaning “God with us”--is with us but not in that terrifying, judging sort of way that we must fear. Rather, with us as an expression of God’s unconditional love, the kind of love that can drive out fear.

But it's not the kind of love that comes in and fixes everything for us. We still have to muddle through the challenges of family--which can be the source of some of the greatest pain and anguish in our lives; the struggles with the church in its divisiveness and survival issues; struggles with our national politics as we try to hear what we need to hear and something we can really trust; struggles with the warring madness of our world. And, through it all it is tempting to feel that God has abandoned us--has abandoned a world in which people can be so cruel to each other; has abandoned us in our own families when things seem to break down and break apart and we just can't reach over the gulf and estrangement happens; has abandoned us as a church when we seem so divided and so broken up and so lost in our internal squabbling that we cannot get together and focussed on what the church is truly called to be.

It is indeed easy and tempting to feel that God has abandoned us. But the sign of God's presence is not success; it's not everything going the way we think it should. That old motion picture "Pleasantville" expressed that black and white scene of life where everything was nice until someone from the real world entered Pleasantville accidentally and brought some reality. And with that reality came pain and struggle.

It's not that God's presence removes all the pain and struggle. Rather, it just absolutely transforms life in the midst of the real, ordinary, worries and anguishes of our day, whether it's about our own personal lives, or about the global warring craziness of our world, or about the politicians arguing with each other interminably. Life is transformed. That daily moment of struggle and worry and anguish is transformed simply by remembering that God is with us. We have a tendency as human beings to flip over to the other side and think we must get this right. We must perfect it, we must get our act together, we must be fine, before we can open our lives and let God see what great people we are. But in doing that we destroy our own souls because we wander off and ignore the presence of God. We start feeling alone and afraid and abandoned. However, when we remember that this world we live in, all of it, is God's, the struggles we face become transformed, utterly transformed, and there is a way through whatever we are facing. We're not alone; God is with us.

This wonderful Christmas story says all of that in a way that is not just words. It is this marvellous story of angels and stars and shepherds that we can tell over and over again and watch our children enact. And it doesn't matter how many times we've heard it or seen it; it touches our hearts again and again. And that's because we as human beings over and over again lose that sense and assurance of God with us. Whenever our hearts are touched again with that assurance, it's like being reborn once more, recovering that sense of the beauty of life with that Throne of David at the centre. It's like recovering that marvellous expression of God's simple, pure, everlasting, unconditional love.

Transcribed and edited for publication by Sue and By Reesor