

“David the Strong King”

(The Great Story of the Bible, Chapter 80)

2 Samuel 5.1-5; 7.8-16

Rev. Bill Pinches

Mason First Presbyterian Church

Mason, Michigan

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If you’ve joined us in the last few months, you need to know that we’re taking a long journey through the entire Bible here at Mason First Presbyterian Church. We started a couple years ago, taking breaks at various points along the way. We’re now about halfway through the Old Testament. When we left off just before Easter, David had been crowned as the second King of Israel, following the death of his father-in-law, Saul. For those of you keeping track, that was right around the year 1000 BC.

We’re going to take four weeks to look at various aspects of David’s life as King of all Israel. Most of the book of 2 Samuel and most of the book of 1 Chronicles provide very detailed depictions of what went on during David’s reign. David had a *huge* impact on Israel and left an *enormous* legacy. He is one of the most significant people in the entire Bible, mentioned by name nearly 1000 times, including over 50 times in the New Testament. But what was David *like*? Was he a good king or a bad king? That’s not an easy question to answer. I stumbled onto an online forum this week where someone asked that very question and there was a long list of responses. As I skimmed down the page, I thought that most of the answers seemed shallow. David was a very complex person. It’s hard to pigeonhole him into one category or another. There were lots of things he did really well. There were some things he did poorly, and some mistakes he made that cost him dearly. He had some strengths that Israel truly needed, and certain weaknesses which he *sometimes* was able to overcome and sometimes *not*. He was a man of deep faith, yet he did not always act in spiritually mature ways. He did some truly great things, and he made some *really bad* mistakes. The biblical writers preserved *all* of that: the good, the bad, and the ugly. Earlier this week I read through David’s story, in its entirety, alternating back and forth between 2 Samuel and 1 Chronicles. There are many places where 1 Chronicles repeats almost verbatim what is said in 2 Samuel, but there are numerous details that Chronicles provides that Samuel doesn’t mention, and *very significant* parts of the story that Chronicles carefully omits. The whole business with Bathsheba, for example, is completely bypassed in the Chronicles version of the story. David looks pretty good – in Chronicles. The story is more complex in Samuel. More human. More real.

I’m going to open these four weeks today by looking at David’s effectiveness as a king. I believe that David was an *incredibly* effective leader for Israel. Why? What made him be so effective? What kind of qualities did he have that Israel truly *needed*? And – mindful that this is an election year for us –

are there lessons for us here, about the kinds of qualities we should be looking for in *our* next leader?

I think there were two qualities that made David a *highly effective leader*. The first: David was a really strong king. I don't mean that he was physically strong himself so much as I mean he had very strong leadership skills, particularly in military affairs, at a time when Israel really needed that. He was able to organize and mobilize Israel's army to achieve *great* success against the countries that were giving Israel so much grief. Israel was surrounded by several other small but mighty kingdoms: the Philistines to the southwest, the Edomites to the southeast, the Moabites and Ammonites to the east, and – new on the scene – the kingdom of Zobah, to the north. Saul had fought against all five of those kingdoms during his reign and subdued *none* of them; when David came to power, most of them were continuing to send incursions into Israel. To make matters even more difficult, some remnants of the house of Saul wanted one of Saul's sons (a man named Ish-bosheth) to be king of Israel instead of David, and were willing to fight for it. So David inherited a *messy* situation, and there was *constant* warfare for quite some time. But how David handled the domestic situation is telling. Ish-bosheth, the would-be king, made a false accusation against his own general (a man named Abner), which angered Abner so much that he opened negotiations with David. David was very willing to negotiate, and working together David and Abner brought the civil war to an end. But then both Abner and Ish-bosheth were murdered. David gave Abner an honorable burial, calling him a "prince" and a "great man" (2 Samuel 3.38), and David called Ish-bosheth a "righteous man." David was able to look at his political opponents and see the *good* in them. He knew when to fight, and when to make peace. He knew how to fight with *honor*. He treated his rivals with *respect*. They were still Israelites, after all. They should never have been enemies. Compare *that* with current trends in contemporary American politics!

Once David had secured the domestic situation, he turned to international affairs. One by one, he defeated *all* the nations that were troubling Israel: the Philistines, the Moabites, the Edomites, the Ammonites, the kingdom of Zobah. Several of those nations became vassal kingdoms, paying tribute to Israel. "David won a name for himself," we are told, "... and the LORD gave victory to David wherever he went" (2 Samuel 8.13-14). Israel became the strongest kingdom between Egypt and Mesopotamia. Three of David's warriors won such renown that they were called "the Three;" thirty more were called "the Thirty;" all of their names and exploits are recorded in 2 Samuel 23 – and it's fascinating reading!

So David was a really strong king. An *incredibly* strong king. But he was also an incredibly *faithful* king – the second critical characteristic that made him so effective. In his reign and in his military exploits David was actively trying to *serve God*. Multiple times in the narrative, David earnestly asks God what he should do next. "David inquired of the LORD. 'Shall I go up to one of the towns of Judah?' he asked. The LORD said, 'Go up.' David asked, 'Where shall I go?' 'To Hebron,' the LORD answered." (2 Samuel 2.1) So David went up to Hebron. "David inquired of the LORD, 'Shall I go and attack the Philistines? Will you deliver them into my hands?' The LORD answered him, 'Go, for I will surely deliver the Philistines into your hands.'" (2 Samuel 5.19) "David inquired of the LORD, and he answered, 'Do not go straight up, but circle around behind them and attack them in front of the poplar trees.'" David wins battle after battle because *he keeps looking to God for guidance*. He's not just making rash or willful decisions on his own – he's truly *praying* about each next step he should take. Thus the biblical narrator says: "David became more and more powerful, because the LORD God

Almighty was with him.” (2 Samuel 5.10) That doesn’t just mean that God had a special place in his heart for David – it meant that *David* had a special place in his heart for *God*. When all the battles are over and Israel is truly at peace, David offers a fervent prayer of thanksgiving to God. It’s long; you can read the whole thing in 2 Samuel 22. It begins: “The LORD is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation. He is my stronghold, my refuge and my savior – from violent people you save me. I called to the LORD, who is worthy of praise, and have been saved from my enemies.” It ends: “The LORD lives! Praise be to my Rock! Exalted be my God, the Rock, my Savior! He is the God who avenges me, who puts the nations under me, who sets me free from my enemies. You exalted me above my foes; therefore I will praise you, LORD, among the nations; I will sing the praises of your name. He gives his king great victories; he shows unfailing kindness to his anointed, to David and his descendants forever.” These words weren’t written for show. No, these were words of praise and thanksgiving to the God who – David clearly believed – had delivered them from all their enemies. *David truly trusted in God*. He actively *sought the Lord’s counsel and guidance*. The more David listened to God, *the better a king he was*. The more effective he was. The more Israel benefited from David’s leadership. David secured a stronger and more lasting peace for Israel than *any other Israelite leader*, past or present – and he did it through his *relationship with God*.

A thousand years later, when Israel had been overpowered by the Assyrians and then the Babylonians and then the Greeks and finally the Romans, and many of the Jews were *sick* of the foreign rule and subjugation they had been living under for *centuries*, there was a fervent longing for a king like David. Someone who could kick all those oppressive foreign overlords out of Israel. Someone who could make the country whole again. Someone who could bring peace. Someone who could rule with a mighty but just hand. Someone who would do it all *faithfully*, in service to the Lord God Almighty. Along comes Jesus of Nazareth, whose stepfather Joseph was a *direct descendant* of King David himself. Jesus was given many names – “Son of Man,” “Son of God,” “Messiah,” “Christ” – we tend to think those are the important ones. But let us not forget that people also called him “Son of David.” When they called him *that*, what many of them were thinking was, “*Please, Jesus. Be like David. Kick these Romans out of Israel. Rule with strength and power, in the name of the Lord.*” Jesus did become a king, and he does rule with strength and power in the name of the Lord. He’s already won a victory far greater than *any* victory David ever achieved, and in the end he’ll win the war.

But back to the present. There’s an election underway. What kind of qualities would *you* like to see in our next president? It’s become very clear that there are a lot of people in our country who want a president with *strength*. A president with a *kick butt and take names* kind of attitude. David had that quality; it’s part of what made him so successful at defeating Israel’s enemies. But that quality was tempered by another quality: a genuine, sincere desire to *serve God*. A habit of *asking for God’s guidance* before making *any* important decision. One of the responsibilities of the President of the United States is to be the Commander-in-Chief of our armed forces. That person wields a *lot* of power. I don’t know about you – but I want someone doing that job who’s going to be *asking God* before making *any significant military decision*. Someone who’s *listening* to what God says. Someone who’s seeking to *follow God’s will*. I want our President to have – like David had – a *real* relationship with God.

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