

“The Throne of His Ancestor David”

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16 • Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26 • Romans 16:25-27 • Luke 1:26-38

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Fourth Sunday of Advent

So are you ready for Christmas? Shopping done, cards sent, goodies baked, menu prepared? You're running out of time, running, and your time's up! Well, actually, no – not quite. It's still the season of Advent; it won't technically be Christmas Eve until sundown. You've still got time!

Most of our scripture readings for this Fourth Sunday of Advent have to do, in some way, with the royal throne of King David, who ruled the people of Israel a thousand years before Jesus. The Old Testament reading speaks of David's desire to build a permanent temple in Jerusalem for the worship of God, God's response to David that it is not yet time, and God's promise that David's "house" and "kingdom" and "throne shall be established forever." The Psalm speaks of God's covenant with David, God's "chosen servant;" God promises, among other things, that God's "hand shall always remain with him." The Gospel reading establishes that Joseph, the betrothed of Mary, was "of the house of David," and that God will give Jesus "the throne of his ancestor David." The fact that Joseph was "descended from the house and family of David" is crucially important in the story of Jesus's birth; that detail is why Jesus was born in Bethlehem, the ancestral home of David's family, rather than Mary and Joseph's hometown of Nazareth. David is mentioned more than 50 times in the New Testament – about five times more frequently than many of the apostles! The title "Son of David" is used for Jesus more than a dozen times in the Gospels, and the second thing Matthew says about Jesus is that he is the "son of David." The only thing Matthew says before that is that Jesus is the Messiah. So there is a *very* strong and important connection between Jesus and David, one that underpins the entire Christmas story; that connection is pivotal to Jesus' identity and role. But *why*? I'm going to unpack that this morning.

Let's start with David himself. Who was he? A shepherd boy, to begin with; he was the youngest of eight sons of a man named Jesse, who lived in the town of Bethlehem, just a few miles south of Jerusalem. David had at least two sisters, and a mother, whose name is not given in the Bible. But we know a lot about David's great-grandmother, Ruth. She was a Moabite, a foreigner. That means that David was not a "pure" Israelite; he had foreign blood in him. And that was *okay*!

David was a gifted musician, skilled with the lyre, a kind of harp. He was also very good with a slingshot, undoubtedly a skill he learned while defending his father's sheep from ravenous wolves. David grew up during the reign of King Saul, the first king of Israel, who was prone to fits of madness. Saul's servants discern that the King would benefit from a musician who could play soothing music; one of them suggests David, whom he described as "skillful in playing, a man of valor, a warrior, prudent in speech, and a man of good presence, and the Lord is with him." So David comes into Saul's service, and becomes his armor-bearer. Not long afterward, David gained national recognition when he defeated the mighty Philistine giant Goliath – who terrified the entire Israelite army! – with just his

slingshot. Saul becomes insanely jealous of David's gifts and popularity, tries to kill him, and wages war against him, even though David had a close friendship with Saul's son Jonathan and was married to Saul's daughter. Twice during that conflict, David had an opportunity to kill Saul, and chose not to, out of respect for his King. Later, when Saul and Jonathan are killed in a fierce battle against the Philistines, the Israelites anoint David as their new King. He begins his reign in the city of Hebron, about 19 miles south of Jerusalem, then later conquers the city of Jerusalem and makes it the capital of his kingdom. He brings into Jerusalem the Ark of the Covenant – that sacred chest that contained the two tablets of the Ten Commandments and upon which was believed to reside the very presence of God. David wanted to build a temple for God in Jerusalem, but God said no, not yet. David's military strength was tremendous; he and his army defeated the Jebusites, the Philistines, the Moabites, the Edomites, the Amalekites, the Ammonites, subjugating them and greatly expanding Israel's borders.

David was hailed throughout his kingdom, and beyond. But he made two terrible mistakes that tarnished his reign and remain scandalous and controversial to this day. First, he lusted after and brought to his bed a woman named Bathsheba, the wife of one of his own generals, named Uriah. Bathsheba became pregnant, and David tried to cover it up by arranging for Uriah to come home from the war front so that the husband and wife could enjoy a night together. But Uriah didn't feel it right to do that when his men didn't have that same opportunity, so he declined. David tried again, this time getting Uriah drunk; still Uriah refused. So David then committed his second terrible mistake: he arranged to have Uriah killed. Bathsheba mourned her husband's death, then David "brought her to his house, and she became his wife and bore him a son." But, as the Bible so beautifully puts it, "the thing that David had done displeased the Lord." God sends a prophet to confront David. David, to his credit, realizes he has sinned against the Lord. His newborn child becomes very ill. David prays mightily, but to no avail; the child dies. David "rose from the ground, washed, anointed himself, and changed his clothes. He went into the house of the Lord and worshiped." This, too, is to David's credit; when faced with the consequences of his own sins, he doesn't *run away from God* – he runs *toward* God. He makes a full confession of his sin – that's what Psalm 51 is all about – and earnestly restores his relationship with God. David was by no means perfect, but he did sincerely repent.

There's a lot more to David's story. He had eight wives and at least eighteen children. His household was a mess! One of David's sons rapes one of David's daughters; another son murders the rapist; yet another son rebels against David and forces him out of Jerusalem, until that rebel is killed. Near the end of David's life, another son tries to set himself up as king. David dies at the age of seventy, having ruled for 40 years, and – after a brief civil war! – he is succeeded by his son Solomon.

As significant as David was during his lifetime – shepherd, musician, warrior, king, lover, repentant sinner, grieving father – he became even *more* significant after his death. All of the subsequent kings of Judah – there were about 20 of them! – were direct descendants of David. But David was remembered – for better or for worse – as the greatest king of all. Centuries later, as Israel's fortunes worsened and they lost their homeland, many Jews came to believe that, in the future, God would give them a king from David's line, a political ruler who would save Israel, defeat their enemies, and lead Israel into a great new age. This future king was called the *Mashiach*, the "Anointed One"; in English, *Messiah*. As a direct descendant of David, this Messiah was also called the "Son of David." These beliefs did not fully form until after most of the Old Testament was written. The Jewish texts that contain the most detailed references to the Messiah were written a century or two before Jesus was born, including a book called "1 Enoch" and some of the Dead Sea Scrolls, but there are early hints of the Messiah in the Old Testament. Some examples: "A throne shall be established in steadfast love in the tent of David, and on it shall sit in faithfulness a ruler who seeks justice and is swift to do what

is right.” (Isaiah 16:5) “The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.” (Jeremiah 23:5; cf. Jeremiah 33:15) “My servant David shall be king over them, and they shall all have one shepherd.” (Ezekiel 37:24) “I will raise up the booth of David that is fallen and repair its breaches and raise up its ruins and rebuild it as in the days of old.” (Amos 9:11) “On that day a fountain shall be opened for the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to cleanse them from sin and impurity.” (Zechariah 13:1) There are several other passages similar to that in the Old Testament. David was long dead, his kingdom long since torn to shreds ... but the Jewish Messianic hope was that the glory of David would one day return, his throne would be re-established, the enemies of God would be vanquished, and a faithful ruler would sit on David’s throne, *forever and forevermore*. All of that – and more! – came to pass. But not in the way most faithful Jews expected!

“In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David.” (Luke 1:26-27) It *matters* that Joseph was of the house of David. The Messiah *would come* from the house of David. But our scriptures state clearly and repeatedly that Jesus was not the son of Joseph in a *biological* sense. Joseph was betrothed to Mary, but we are told, over and over, that Mary was a virgin, that they did not have sexual relations before she gave birth. The New Testament gives us two genealogies for Jesus, one in Matthew, one in Luke. Those genealogies don’t match – in Matthew, Joseph is descended from David’s son Solomon and that long line of Davidic kings; in Luke, Joseph is descended from David’s son Nathan and a long line of commoners. There has been endless speculation about why the genealogies differ, but both clearly affirm that Joseph was a direct descendant of King David. Jesus wasn’t Joseph’s *biological* son – but Joseph raised Jesus *as if he were* his biological son, and Jesus inherited all the legal rights and privileges of being Joseph’s son. Some Christians think that Mary was *also* a direct descendant of King David, but that’s speculation; we just don’t have enough evidence to know for sure. Some Christians even think that the genealogy in Luke’s Gospel is really *Mary’s* genealogy, despite the fact that Luke himself says it’s *Joseph’s* line that he’s tracing. (Sometimes people read things into the Bible that just aren’t there!) The bottom line is that Jesus was a descendant of David because Joseph adopted him as his son. This is how Jesus came to be called the “Son of David.”

Gabriel declares to Mary that her son Jesus “will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” All the prophecies about the long-expected Messiah of the Jews who would sit on the throne of David were coming to pass. Except, they were going to turn out *better* than anyone expected. For Jesus was not going to have any of David’s personal flaws, or make sinful mistakes like the ones David made. Jesus wasn’t going to sit on a throne that could be taken away from him, the way David’s throne was eventually taken away from David’s successors. No, Jesus was going to have an *eternal* throne, a *heavenly* throne. Jesus would be King, but not just the king of one people, not just the King of the Jews; Jesus would reign over all of *creation*. And while David conquered and vanquished many of the enemies of the Jews, Jesus would conquer and vanquish enemies greater than any humans: the enemies of *sin* and *death*. David’s greatest victories occurred in the *middle* of his life, but Jesus’s two greatest victories would come at the very *end* of his earthly life, and even *after* – on a cross, and in a garden tomb. David may have been the greatest king *the Jews* had ever known, but Jesus would be the greatest king the *universe* has ever known.

So come, my friends. Come tonight, and let us worship, let us worship ... the newborn King.

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