

Keeping God to God's Promises

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II Samuel 7:18-29

Luke 1:26-38

“And now, O Lord God, as for the word that you have spoken concerning your servant and concerning his house, confirm it forever; do as you have promised.”

Praying in public is a very tricky business. Most of us who must, do so self-consciously at our best and self-deceptively at our worst, either way making Jesus' point: when you really want to pray, when it is the Lord God with whom you want to speak, you should find the nearest closet and shut the door. That is what the royal writers of II Samuel want you to think David has done. After hearing God's astounding promise to him through the voice of God's prophet Nathan, the promise of a never-ending dynasty, we read that King David went in alone and sat before the Lord to pray.

Frankly, I doubt this report! Imagine instead an ancient version of Richard Nixon's voice activated tape cassette, recording David's prayer for posterity; or conjure Rupert Murdoch's son authorizing the court reporter to tap David's direct line to God for the morning's headlines. David prayed knowing full well that all of Israel, from that day forward, would hear his politically loaded conversation with the Lord of Hosts, a name for God that means, translated loosely, the God of Israel's armed forces.

“Kings who have just had the world irreversibly handed over to them tend to pray in reliable, disciplined, calculating ways,” observes Old Testament professor Walter Brueggemann. Moreover, “People with empires to maintain undoubtedly pray differently, at least in public, probably also in private.”

If we are to hear David's prayer in all honesty this morning, we would do well to spend a little time considering the interplay between faith and politics that has gone before it. The premise of II Samuel's seventh chapter is that David wants to build a nice house for God, now that God's people are settled in the land and now that David has brought God's tent [the portable dwelling place of God's presence] into David's city. God needs some permanence! David's chief of staff agrees. “Go” Nathan says, “do all that you have in mind: for the Lord is with you.” The unspoken truth here is that empires need temples, need divine legitimacy, need religion to be civil...ized.

But sometime in the middle of the night, the chief of staff has second thoughts prompted by none other than the voice of the Lord God. What he hears turns out to be a convenient truth. There will be no house for God, he is told by God to tell David. Rather, playing on the meaning of the word house, God will make a house for David, a dynasty, a permanent state, a kingdom that will be established forever. God has promised to David's dynasty, in so many words, “unchallengeable certitude.” *This* son of God has risen, but risen to political power by way of God's partisan word. Moreover, the Lord God has done a theological about face in the same almighty breath, promising God's faithfulness and steadfast love to David unconditionally, no ifs ands or buts. The statement is breathtaking until you try to separate the theology from the ideology. Because God's promise is to the king,

separation of religion and politics is impossible, leaving Brueggemann to conclude that our text is, from one perspective, “an act of royal propaganda. Particular power arrangements that benefit some at the expense of others are now legitimated and guaranteed to perpetuity by the promise of God.” Phew!

I try to imagine the back room conversations, the midnight negotiations as the exact wording of David’s prayer is readied for the next day’s press release. “[W]hether we think it was issued from God’s throne in the divine council or from the star council of the palace” quips Brueggemann, the spin turns out to be worthy of royalty. Likewise, I think of the discussion in Rome when, at the First Vatican Council of 1870, papal infallibility was unveiled as dogma. What a concept! Unchallengeable certitude! Though I think the theological break of II Samuel 7 for Israel was infinitely more radical. Suddenly the God whose relationship had been with the people and whose commanding word carried with it an uncompromising judgment [if you do as I say you shall be blessed but if you do not do as I say you shall be cursed], this relationship now came down to one person, to David and his line. The “if” removed, David and David’s son would still be punished for their sin, but God’s steadfast love and faithfulness for David’s dynasty were certain.

In response to such a promise, what can such a privileged human being say to the promise-maker? “It is a persistent question for those who are entitled, privileged, gifted and guaranteed,” says Brueggemann. “Such a status before God requires a specific practice of prayer” and here it is. First there is a formal statement of deference. “Who am I?” David begins once the closet door is shut and the tape turned on, “and what is my house that you have brought me thus far?” His first words are diffident words and, in their diffidence, they seem to magnify God in relation to God’s humble servant. Or could it be that David’s first words are calculated to make us think him humble whose dynasty has just been established forever by divine decree?

Then without skipping a beat, lest God or the listening public forget what has just been proffered, David reminds God quaintly that God has spoken of David’s house “for a great time to come” and adds, leaning into the microphone, “May this be instruction for the people, O Lord God.”

Next David turns to reflect with God on that currently controversial quality of nations and nation’s gods known as exceptionalism. First deference and then a self-serving sort of doxology. Because of God’s promise to David, there is no God like this God and there is no nation on earth like this nation.

Almost three thousand years later, self-serving doxology is still expected of rulers and monarchs. Asked whether he believed in American exceptionalism, the President said that he did, and then went on to say that he believed in our exceptionalism just as he suspected that Brits believed in Britain’s exceptionalism and the Greeks believed in Greek exceptionalism. The answer created a firestorm among true believers who certainly believe that God’s promise to the founding fathers of this nation has superseded all other promises God has made to any nation, thereby confusing the theological doctrine of election with the political doctrine of exceptionalism. Again, David’s prayer reminds us that it has ever been thus!

What follows, of course, when the promises of God are identified with the purposes of the state, is political certitude. “[T]here is no room left for ambiguity or playfulness or exploration...for the banishment of playful room makes things secure. State truth,” says Brueggemann, “tends not to be marked by a sense of humor” but by the one-dimensional language of certitude, of competing certitudes in the case of

our so-called congressional leaders meeting this afternoon.

Finally the prayerful king brings it home with a demand. “And now....” And now says David to the Lord God three times as though he had finally arrived at the point of his prayer, deference and doxology being preliminary; arrived at the therefore following all the whereas-es. Whereas I am your humble servant [deference]; whereas you are an exceptional God and whereas your people are an exceptional people [doxology]; therefore I, the King, am holding you, the God, to your promises [demand]! God knows that to promise is to take on a duty toward us even as to command is to require something of us. Trust and obedience, says Yale theologian Nicholas Wolterstorff, are the appropriate human responses. Instead you get the feeling that David believes himself to have assumed the driver’s seat in this relationship. “Confirm the word forever,” he says and then repeats: “do as you have promised.” Think of the possibilities, says David in so many words: your name will be magnified *forever* (forever, remember?) as the God of this exceptional nation. O God of our armed forces, God of Israel, he goes on, because you said you would build me a house, I have found courage to speak to you this way. Really? After two more “and nows”, David concludes, “for you, O Lord God, have spoken, and with your blessing shall the house of your servant be blessed...{let me remind you just one more time)...forever.” Amen! That should do it, should seal the deal, should hold God to the promises God made to David’s line...forever. Done!

But very soon, Israel’s history would shake the nation’s certitude and cause God’s people not so much to doubt God’s promise to David as to call God to account with the anger and pathos of a spurned lover. What we know is that the psalm we sang today (Psalm 89), a psalm that repeats God’s promises to David, likely was part of the temple liturgy for generations, confirming Israel’s certainty in her own exceptionalism. However if you read the psalm from beginning to end, darkness gathers in the middle as God’s people do business with God’s rejection of them: with the Babylonian exile. Verse after verse calls God to account for renouncing God’s promises to David’s son, defiling his crown in dust, breaking his walls and laying his strongholds in ruin. At the end of the indictment, the congregation cries: How long, O Lord? Will you hide yourself forever? Where is your steadfast love of old...your faithfulness you swore to David?

So it came to be that the prayer the royal court meant for propaganda, God purposed for a promise that would become the foundation of an unshakable hope in the coming reign of God’s messiah, a hope that has shaped both Jews and Christians into communities of great expectations. What we have wrestled with in the seventh chapter of II Samuel is not merely one dynasty’s political propaganda. Rather in the rubble of the temple built to contain the Lord God, Israel holds fast to God’s promise to David as the basis of their hope that one is coming who will reign in faithfulness and steadfast love, in justice and in peace.

You and I confess that the son born to a maiden two thousand years ago is that one in whom the promise is complete, potent, made known, revealed even as it is hidden in his flesh. He is God’s word of faithfulness and steadfast love who pitched a tent with us at the center of human history. Yet still the promise is just that and no more. Still we walk in darkness and live in a hope fueled by what we have glimpsed in him of God’s reign and no more. Said the angel to Mary, repeating the promise: “...the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” Said Mary to the angel in uncalculating echoes of David’s calculated prayer, “How can this be?” Who am I? But when the angel departed, her deference gave way to doxology: “My soul magnifies the Lord,” she sang, leaving us, late in time, to do the demanding.

And now, we say in our public prayers that are the prayers of the privileged, do as you have promised, even though we know in him who revealed the content of the promise that it will mean a reversal of our fortunes. And now we say with the earliest of Christians, “Maranatha! Come, Lord Jesus!” lest our rulers with empires to maintain send the hungry empty away again this afternoon. And now, Lord God come quickly to reign in our streets again, for we surely will bring it all to ruin without you! Quickly come! Amen.