A River Runs Through It
2 Samuel 5:1-10

In two weeks, the Summer Olympics kick off in Paris. And for the first time ever, the opening ceremonies of an Olympic games won't take place in a stadium, but on a river.

The Olympians will parade through the city on the River Seine, each country in a different boat, with the crowd in stands along the bank. Rivers have long been means of connecting one city to another, and so it's fitting that in these world games, the Seine will bring athletes from 206 different countries together.

But because rivers are natural means of transport, they also expose a city to vulnerability. For example, in 845, an army of Vikings sailed up the river and laid siege to the city, withdrawing only after the French king paid a hefty ransom.

Rivers function in many different ways. They provide water and life; they allow for trade, for travel, for the exchange of ideas and the gathering of different people groups; they can serve as an entry point for invaders.

And it's this last possibility that features in our story today. The water source flowing into the city becomes the means by which Jerusalem is taken.

But before we get to that decisive moment, we have to catch up on what's happened since we last saw David. After the defeat of Goliath, Saul is delighted with David, and grants him a high rank in the army. But then David grows in popularity, and in jealousy, Saul tries to kill David. David flees and becomes an outlaw. Saul pursues David, but even when David has an opportunity to kill Saul, he doesn't, because he respects that Saul is the king God appointed over the people.

Eventually Saul and his sons Jonathan, Abinadab, and Malki-Shua die in battle against the Philistines. The leaders in the north put Saul's other son Ish-Bosheth on the throne, and for seven and a half years a bloody civil war ensues between the north under Ish-Bosheth and the south under David.

It's clear, however, that David is the stronger man, and people from the north begin to defect to David, leaving Ish-Bosheth vulnerable. Two of his warlords seize the moment, and they kill Ish-Bosheth, taking his head to David, hoping to be rewarded.

Only again, David, who still holds the house of Saul in great esteem, is outraged at this act of treachery against the family of God's anointed. So rather than a reward, the two men are themselves executed.

This bloody backstory is important because it shows that David isn't going to take the throne by force. He is not innocent of shedding blood, but he refuses to participate in the active pursuit of Saul and his family. God had promised to give David the throne, and David trusts that promise. He will not act prematurely, will not seize the throne on his own terms.

Finally, though, the leaders of the north see what we readers have known to be true all along, that David is the rightful claimant to the throne. With their own king dead, they come to David at Hebron, hat in hand. They acknowledge that David is one of them, their own flesh and blood. They profess that even while Saul was king, it was David who *acted* like a king. And they admit that they have known all along that God had promised the throne to David. David has God on his side. The people want to be on that same side.

So they make David their king in a coronation that looks different than Saul's. David makes a covenant with the people before the Lord. This is

as much a theological agreement about how they will live together as it is a political one. And it means King David won't have the kind of unrestrained power King Saul had. This is a covenant. There are checks and balances in place. David makes promises to the people even as the people make promises to him.

Things look like they'll be different, this time around. New king, new times.

And…new palace. In a new city.

Demonstrating smart leadership right off the bat, David doesn't fall back on one of the existing capital cities, Gibeah in the north or Hebron in the south, but sets his sights on Jerusalem, which sits in between the two regions. He and his band of mercenaries march off to Jerusalem, where they're taunted by the Jebusites inside the fortress who claim that even the blind and lame could fend off David's men.

But David *does* conquer Jerusalem, and he uses the city's water source to do so. Whether he sneaks in through the water shaft or cuts off the water supply to the city, he finds the city's weak point and exploits it, capturing the fortress, which he calls the City, not of Israel or Judah, but of David. Something new has begun.

And this new thing will capture the imagination of God's people for centuries to come. Jerusalem, Zion, the city of God, home of the temple, the place where God dwells with his people. Walter Brueggemann writes that "The wonder of the Jerusalem establishment permits Israel to have new theological conviction about what God will do in time to come."

Jerusalem becomes the focal point of Israel's hope of restoration when they're taken into exile and made subservient to a foreign empire. One

day, the people tell themselves, a new king, a messiah, will march into Jerusalem and reclaim the city of David, and we will be saved.

Jerusalem provides great hope for the people. And yet, as a river can be a means of bringing people together both in harmony and in war, the City of David, a place chosen for its neutrality, for the possibility of bringing people together, for its inclusive potential, also becomes a place of *exclusion* and conflict.

And this happens right off the bat. The references to "the blind and the lame" in our text are some of the more confusing verses in all of Scripture. We don't entirely know what's going on when David calls the "blind and the lame" his enemies.

> It could be that the Jebusites actually put the blind and the lame on the city battlements to taunt David, thus putting them in the way of attack.
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> It could be that David is turning the taunt back on the Jebusites, saying *they* are in fact blind and lame, unable to defend themselves.
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> There might also be an obscure reference to Leviticus 21, in which God decrees that no person with a defect or disability, which would be seen in that time as a ritual blemish, could serve in the temple.

We don't exactly know what these verses are implying, but in one way or another, they point to a casting out, an exclusion of people. The Jebusites are routed from their home. The blind and the lame are prohibited from entering the palace. There is a drawing of lines that happens here, and that will continue to happen in Jerusalem in the centuries that follow. Today one need only look to Jerusalem to see a place rife with conflict, contested border lines, and division.

When David establishes his kingdom out of Jerusalem, the city becomes a focal point of hope for God's people. But it does not live up to that expectation. Ruled by human kings, it falls prey to human whims, to power grabs, to greed, to vanity, to all the human proclivities that cause one person to turn against another.

But, as we'll see in a couple weeks, God made another promise to David, to establish his house and his kingdom forever. And our God is a God who keeps his promises. So he does another new thing. After David is long gone, after Israel has gone into and returned from exile, when Jerusalem is home to a puppet-king who serves a foreign power, the Messiah does enter the city. He enters the temple, the house of the Lord, and there, says Matthew, he heals the blind and the lame. Jesus does a new thing.

Jesus establishes his kingdom, not through a power grab, but through sacrifice. He makes himself vulnerable. He does what David, what Israel, what all the kings and prophets could not do and offers himself as a truly righteous offering. He is the remnant of faithful Israel, and undergoes divine judgment for sin, exile, and restoration to life as the foundation of a *new* Israel. God's people find their spiritual home no longer in cities or temples, but in Christ, in whom God's glory dwells among his people.

And in Christ, all things hold together. This is the great truth professed by Paul in his letter to the Colossians, when he says, "He, that is Jesus, is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross."

In Christ all things hold together. And Christ is the head of the body, this body, the church. The story of God's presence continues to expand, moving from a city and a temple, to the Son of God and Son of Man, to the people who are united to Christ by his death and resurrection. The Church becomes the hands and feet of Jesus, the means by which God's reconciling love becomes known. In a world of hostility and pride and loneliness and violence, the Church becomes the locus of hope for what God is doing in the world.

Which should give us great pause. Because the Church's track record with reconciliation and inclusion and breaking down walls of hostility does not inspire a great deal of hope. We are forever drawing lines – between men and women, between black people and white people, between queer people and straight people, between new Christians and long-time Christians, between colonial powers and indigenous people groups, between the CRC and the RCA and the URC and the PRC, between the people who think like us and the ones who do not.

Like Jerusalem, the Church has not exactly been what God has called her to be. Has, in too many instances, not been a place of welcome, a place of reconciliation, a place where people experience the love of God.

But thanks be to God, our hope is not in the Church. The *Church's* hope is in Christ Jesus. The King. The Messiah.

And he has told us that a day is coming when he will return, establishing his kingdom in all its fullness. John has a vision of this coming kingdom, and in it he sees…a city.

"Then I saw 'a new heaven and new earth,' for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God,

prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God."

John sees a city, the New Jerusalem. And in this city flows a river.

"Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations."

In this new Jerusalem, this Holy City, the river of God brings life. Brings healing. For all the nations. For all peoples. For Christ is reconciling all things to himself. This is the fulfillment of God's promises made to us in Christ. And God keeps his promises.

We look, then, to the city. We await its coming, as we await the coming of that city's king. Of our king. We await the day when we are gathered together at the wedding banquet of the lamb, gathered in from many different places to sit around one table, with no division of wealth or class or ethnicity or sexuality or knowledge or ability. We await the day when we are made one.

And as we wait, we put our hope into practice. We posture ourselves towards what we know is coming and we seek to live into that which we have been called. We seek to be a people of reconciliation, unity and love.

One of the ways we put our hope into practice is by coming to this table. To partake in a meal that anticipates the feast that is to come, and that reminds us of our unity in Christ, made one with each other by his death and resurrection.

Today we feast. Trusting that God keeps his promises, knowing that one day we will feast in the house of Zion, and there will be shalom.

Would you pray with me?

Reconciling God,
we long for the day when your people are one,
when we dwell together in your presence,
gathered around one table
in the new Jerusalem.
We know that you keep your promises,
so we live in hope and in trust
that this day is coming.
In the meantime, help us to live
as a people oriented towards this hope.
Help us to live in love towards one another,
working towards reconciliation,
breaking down walls,
seeking to be the hands and feet
of Jesus, in whom all things hold together.
Lead us into your peace, O God.
Lead us into your shalom.
We pray this in Christ's name,
Amen.