Sermon on 2 Samuel 7:1-15
CCRC, 28 July 2024
Rev. Tom Bomhof
Something Beautiful for God

Dear Friends of God,
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When you've been blessed, or have been helped by someone, or experienced success, or you've acquired wealth, there is something within you that says, I want to give back.

- I want to give back to the hospital where I found healing.
- I want to give back to that friend who got me the job
- I want to give back to God who has blessed me so richly.

This is a beautiful impulse. We don't just want to be takers; we also want to be givers. Our gratitude moves us to want to do great things for the common good. As Mother Teresa says, you want to do something beautiful for God.
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I like to think that King David was in that kind of place when we meet him in 2 Samuel 7. He has been so incredibly blessed. God had taken him from a no-account shepherd boy to being the king of a vast domain. David had finished what Saul could not—he subdued every enemy that pressed against them and gave them complete control of the Promised Land. He had established Jerusalem as his throne city and build a fine palace. His territory extended far to the north and south. Nations paid tribute to him. Diplomats met with him, trade agreements were established, borders were secure. Wealth, peace, prosperity—David had it all. It is a rare thing for a king to rest from his enemies. What a profound blessing.

David takes stock of all this and his impulse is to give back:
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> After the king was settled in his palace and the LORD had given him rest from all his enemies around him, he said to Nathan the prophet, "Here I am, living in a house of cedar, while the ark of God remains in a tent."

Now there is a man after God's own heart. He wants to give back to the one who had blessed him. I live in a cedar-paneled palace and God lives in a travel-worn ten. I want to change that. I want to do something beautiful for God.

Initially Nathan the prophet, his palace pastor and confidant, agrees with him.
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> Nathan replied to the king, "Whatever you have in mind, go ahead and do it, for the LORD is with you."

It seems like a no-brainer. What can be wrong with such a generous gesture? Why shouldn't God have a more established, beautiful dwelling place? The wandering days are over and

Jerusalem is the center of the world. Surely a grand temple would symbolize God's power and glory in this world. Surely that would be appropriate to the station to which God has arrived.

So without consulting God, Nathan gives the religious version of "go for it." "Whatever you have in mind, go ahead and do it, for the LORD is with you." Nathan seems a bit star-struck, and besides, David's plan sounds so timely, so right, and reasonable.
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But right from the start, the language hints that not all is as it appears. Our passage begins by referring to David as "the king."
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> "After the king had established himself," and "Nathan replied to the king."

If David and Nathan don't see it, the writer of the book sees it. There is something going on that isn't right, there is some formality in the language in the language that is distancing and says things are what they seem. It's sort of like your mom using your second name when she calls you to over. You know something's up.

And then there it is:
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> But that night the word of the LORD came to Nathan, saying: "Go and tell my servant David, 'This is what the LORD says: Are you the one to build me a house to dwell in? I have not dwelt in a house from the day I brought the Israelites up out of Egypt to this day. I have been moving from place to place with a tent as my dwelling. Wherever I have moved with all the Israelites, did I ever say to any of their rulers whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, "Why have you not built me a house of cedar?" '

God puts the brakes on these plans. He puts both Nathan and David in their place. I didn't ask for this, nor do I want this from you.
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This tips us off that David is motivated not just by pure desire to give something back to God. When God has to put him back in his place, it tells you that he was overreaching. Walter Breuggemann comments that
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> David's determination to build God a suitable house is part royal-aggrandizement and part genuine piety.
> Walter Brueggemann, Interpretation: First and Second Samuel, 256-7.

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David has been caught up in his success, his position as king, and his brand-new palace. I want to give God a helping hand in establishing his kingdom. I want to put God on a pedestal for all the world to see—to raise God to the station that he deserves. And if I gain even more glory as the king who serves this God, well that's a win-win situation. It wouldn't be just the Temple of Yahweh, it would be the Temple Yahweh *that David built*. David's name and God's name would be that closely linked. It was so subtle that even Nathan the prophet was taken in by it.

Once again, just as we saw last week, David is tempted to co-opt God, to use God for his own ends. This time it's not the ark, but the building around the ark. It's more subtle, but still a violation of the Third Commandment not to take the Lord's name in vain, using it to baptize our own causes and personal projects. That it happens so quickly after the story of the ark tells that it is a human reflex that comes back time and time again.

God's response to David most certainly contains a rebuke to David's arrogance: "Who are you to be building *Me* a house?"
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> "Now then, tell my servant David, 'This is what the LORD Almighty says: I took you from the pasture, from tending the flock, and appointed you ruler over my people Israel. I have been with you wherever you have gone, and I have cut off all your enemies from before you.

David needs to be humbled here, put back into his place. A second time he uses the term "My servant." Everything you have, you have from me. Don't be trying to control me and use me to advance your name in this world. Don't think I need you to make plans for me. God is like the president of a company who hauls a rogue VP into his office to say, "Who is running this company, you or me?" He re-establishes his authority, but stops at firing him for insubordination.
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It makes you wonder about your own motivations. If this is true of a man after God's own heart, could it be true of me? How pure are my motives when I want to give back, or do something beautiful for God? Biblical scholar John Goldingay writes of this story,
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> God's problem with us is that we like to tie God down, keep God under control. We don't want God on the loose. God likes being on the loose. John Goldingay

Is it possible that God might want to do something other than the reasonable, rational, beautiful thing you want to do?
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We might not be control freaks when it comes to God, but let's recognize that sometimes we are "control enthusiasts' when it comes to God. Sometimes we like to think we are building God's kingdom when we are really building our own. And how convenient for us that God agrees with us.

Anne Lamott gives us a test:
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> You can safely assume you've created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do. — Anne Lamott

When God's purposes and God's attitudes stop challenging your own, but are comfortably lined up together, don't be surprised when God calls you by your second name. He doesn't hesitate to do so with the people he loves and blesses.

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David learns that God is God. God is free, independent, on the loose. His glory does not depend on our dreams or our efforts and he rebukes our efforts to control him. He builds up and he brings down. And we need to be careful to remember this when we deal with God.

That is troubling for us. It confuses us. Especially when we are doers who want to be on God's side. We want to do beautiful things for God. We think our plans are reasonable, right, Biblical, on track with God's plans. We don't think we are deluded or self-aggrandizing at all. Yet sometimes our plans don't align with God's plans. Sometimes they really are our causes and our pet projects. Maybe you've had an experience like that—when your plans didn't align with God's plans. Maybe it was building project, or a new ministry that God said no to. How did you respond? What did you learn from the experience? How did you learn to better align your actions with God's will?

The truth David learned, and we keep learning, is that God does not need our efforts. Again, from Goldingay:

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> In the Gospels, the only things we do to God's kingdom are wait for it, see it, enter it, seek it, receive it, inherit it, and declare that it has come. John Goldingay

Notice the verbs that are missing from that list: establish, make, or further. So whenever we speak about establishing the Kingdom of God, or furthering the Kingdom of God, or building the Kingdom of God, we need to pause. The gospel is about what God has done for us, and not about what we do for God.

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To reinforce this truth, God does an unexpected thing. He turns the tables on David in the most delightful and unexpected way. God will build a house for David.

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> Now I will make your name great, like the names of the greatest men on earth….The LORD declares to you that the LORD himself will establish a house for you: When your days are over and you rest with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, your own flesh and blood, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever…Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever.' "

As Eugene Peterson points out, God says, "If there's any building to be done, I'm doing it." Now that was something David could never have anticipated or expected. It was an amazing, surprising, wildly gracious thing. The God of the Covenant makes a personal covenant with David that will never end.

The roles are completely reversed. As Patricia Tull puts it,
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> It will not be David who establishes God, but God who establishes David.

Does David plan to build a house for God? David could not even imagine the "house" that God was going to build for him. God's "house" far surpasses David's proposed "house."
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We know that David did have a son, Solomon, who built a beautiful temple for God. Yet there was more in this covenant promise. Though there were ups and downs, wisdom and folly, blessings and punishments along the way, David's line never lost Yahweh's faithfulness. One day many years later, a writer would put pen to paper and write:
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> This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah the son of David…Matthew 1:1

When the time was right, God sent Jesus, the long-promised Son of David to come to this earth and establish David's throne forever. Jesus was born to be king. Through his death on the cross, his resurrection from the grave and his ascension to the throne in heaven, Jesus brought a human son of David to the throne at the center of all there is. From there he rules over all and will bring about his glorious kingdom in heaven and on earth.
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And what's more, through Jesus, God is building an even greater temple than you can imagine. He builds us ordinary people into the church, which is the temple in which his glory shines.
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> In [Jesus] you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. Ephesians 2:22

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This is all God's work. The greatest blessings of our lives are not the result of our labors, but always the result of God's work. They are always a grace to us, never something we have earned. David could not have imagined God blessing him in this way. God took away a dream that was fraught with mixed motives and turned it into something that gave God glory. How like God to take our feeble, sin-laden efforts and make them into something great.
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So yes, do something beautiful for God. Give back. Pay things forward. And know that God's plans are not our plans so hold your plans loosely. Even spiritually alive people, people after God's own heart, who have a living relationship with God, now and then need to be aware of their tendency to equate their plans with God's plans. And in those moments God graciously reminds them that God is in charge, that his ways are higher than our ways and he is always gracious. Work hard, give back, do your best to be faithful servants. And know that God will bring about blessings and will build his church and kingdom in ways you can't ever imagine.

Amen

Prayer:
Covenant God, we thank You for the promises You made to David and for the ways You guide us in our lives. Help us to trust in Your plans and to serve You with pure hearts. May we always seek to align our actions with Your will and find strength and purpose in Your love. Give us discerning hearts to know and follow your will. Thank you for Jesus, the greater Son of David, who saves us from all our sin and rules with all authority in heaven and on earth. To him be the glory forever. Amen.

Faithful God, you made an extravagant promise to David and kept it through generations of rebellion and failure, until you sent your Son as David's true descendant. Keep us from ever thinking that we can build your kingdom by our programs or efforts, but call us to live out of the kingdom you have built in the death and resurrection of the son of David, Jesus Christ, our Lord, amen.