

Choices and Kings

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2 Samuel 7:8-13 and Romans 1:1-6

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I. [SLIDE #1]

We left off last week with the family of Abraham making a bad choice for a good reason. Their leader, Samuel, was getting old and his sons were as corrupt as the day is long. The elders of Abraham's family sensed that if they didn't do something quickly, their budding tribe would dissolve into chaos or, worse yet, be overrun by neighboring nations. They acted out of fear rather than faith, and so they begged Samuel to appoint a king over them.

This wouldn't have been such a bad thing—I mean what's wrong with wanting a king?—except for the fact that a king represented everything that was detestable to God: human sacrifices, worship of idols, and wholesale exploitation of the poor.

When God made a covenant with Abraham, God wasn't thinking about nationhood or kingship or creating a political dynasty. God's intention, according to scripture, was to call a people who would be faithful to him and be his image bearers to the rest of the world. As we have learned, Abraham's family was blessed to be a blessing. And yet, as we learned last week from Jeff's sermon, God condescended to Israel's desire for king and gave them what they asked for.

It would be nice if we could have freedom and make good choices all the time, but we're learning from the story of Abraham's family that freedom is only as good as our ability to use it in a way that pleases God. Let us pray as we begin.

PRAYER: Thank you, O God, for loving us and calling us to yourself through the Abraham family. Teach us by your word today so that we might grow in wisdom and live by faith. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

II.

The Old Testament passage we read this morning is an oracle from the prophet Nathan speaking to David, the second king of Israel. We've jumped ahead 30 chapters and now find David settling into his role as king. As he looks around, he notices he is sleeping in a palace while the ark of the covenant was being stored in a tent. In this private moment with God's prophet, David becomes suddenly aware that God's warnings about kingship are already beginning to materialize in his own administration, and so he goes to God's prophet with his anxiety, much like a person goes to a pastor when they are having personal problems at work or at home.

David is concerned that his royal lifestyle has upstaged the God who called him as king in the first place. He says in verse 2 to Nathan, “See now, I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent.”

In this moment, Nathan tells David to go ahead and do what he has in mind to do with regard to building a house for the ark. But later on that night, Nathan receives a different word from God on this matter.

III.

We’re like that too. We do something that puts a strain on our relationship with our Heavenly Father and we think we can fix it by our own efforts. It’s like a kid who takes money out of his Dad’s wallet to buy some candy and he thinks that by returning the money before his Dad finds out he can make everything okay. But the real issue is not the money; it’s his relationship with his father that needs fixing. That’s the deeper issue.

Nathan comes to David later that night, therefore, and has a different word to speak to David, a word that reminds David of his place a servant of God. He says, “Are you the one to build me a house to live in? ⁶I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt . . . ⁷Did I ever speak a word with any of the tribal leaders of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, “Why have you not built me a house of cedar?”

In other words, if it didn’t bother me then, what makes you think that it would bother me now, just because I’ve elevated you as a king over my people? You see, God doesn’t want David to build him a house; he wants David to remember who the true Lord of Israel is!

Look how many times God reminds David of his sovereignty in this passage:

- “⁸I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep to be prince over my people Israel”
- “I have been with you wherever you went, and I have cut off all your enemies from before you”
- “I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth”

It’s like God is saying, “lest you’ve forgotten, dear David, I’m the one to do all this, so when I need a house to match your beautiful palace made of cedar, don’t worry, I’ll let you know.”

IV.

Israel’s choice of a king is living proof that God accommodates to our bad choices, but God never tolerates confusion about his sovereignty over history. God invites us to serve him because it is good for us and because it is good for his world, but whether we are princes or paupers, we are always his humble servants, at best.

V.

So God reminds David that he will build a house for himself when and how he so desires and not a moment sooner. The Lord says to David, “¹³Your offspring shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.”

Even though the institution of kingship is fraught with peril, God meets David and Israel where they are and uses the choice of David as king to work out his plan for Israel’s future. Notice, the even goes farther. He turns our bad choices into choices that serve is good purposes.

[SLIDE #2]

In this case, God uses the choice of David as king to foreshadow a different type of kingship, one in which God’s concern for justice and mercy and healing will be fulfilled, literally, by his Son Jesus, the coming Messiah and King. Israel wanted a king like the other nations had, but the God of Israel is not like the gods of other nations who are satisfied by sacrifices given to win their allegiance and to gain their sponsorship of that nation’s agenda. He is, instead, a patient God who works through the human institution of kingship as a sign of his righteous reign on earth.

As you will see in the coming weeks, Israel will crown kings like David who because of his relative faithfulness, will be looked back upon by future generations as a king who rightly led the people of God.

VI.

Now, fast forward with me 1,000 years, and flip over to Romans chapter 1 in your New Testament. Since the time of David, Israel had been longing for a king like him, but all they had experienced was one superpower after another dominating their cultural and political life and carrying them off to distant lands as slaves. Babylon, Assyria, Persia, and Greece have come and gone, and now in this first chapter of Romans, the most fearsome power of all is in charge. The emperor of Rome is claiming to be emperor of the world.

With this backdrop in mind, the Apostle Paul frames the coming of Jesus in terms of Israel’s longing for a king like David. According to the flesh, Paul writes, Jesus is a descendent of David, but according to the spirit, Jesus is declared to be the Son of God. And now, even more importantly in terms of God’s rule over history, Paul claims Jesus to be the true Lord of the world.

In just these few sentences, Paul declares that there is a new Lord in town who is the answer to Israel’s longing for a king like David. This Lord possesses a dual ancestry. Regarding his earthly life he is a descendent of David, but according to his eternal identity, he is the very Son of God.

VII. [SLIDE #3]

Well, what does this mean for you and for me? First, it means that if you’ve longed for someone to set the world straight, you need to look no farther. A king has come in the person of Jesus Christ who is like no other. His interest are not those of a particular nation or ethnic group and he doesn’t do the bidding of even the most powerful men and

women on earth. He is his own Lord, and his agenda is to bring all people into a loving and healing relationship with their Creator.

Second, we have a job to do. As Paul says in verse 5, “Through Jesus Christ we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name.” God’s grace is not for us alone. We have received apostleship too, which means that we’re called to be pioneering advocates for the things Jesus cares about, for his sense of justice, and his compassion for the poor. Thankfully, we’re not only apostles for Christ’s kingly agenda, but the king himself resides in every believer by the power of the Holy Spirit and guides our steps from within.

If this isn’t good news, I don’t know what is. Even in the face of our bad choices, God is working out his purpose both in us and in history. Both bases are covered.

VIII.

But there is something which to me is even more exciting. This kingdom over which Jesus is king reaches to the ends of the earth and last forever. No political system can suppress it; no amount of propaganda can thwart its advance. The people who call Jesus Christ Lord from the time of Jesus’ resurrection onward have continued to bear witness to his authority and to his healing and peacemaking ministry without regard to personal cost and even without regard for their own survival.

I was reminded of this on my recent journey to East Africa. Because of the trusting friendship that we have developed over the years with our sisters and brothers of Kenya, their people coming here and serving in our churches, and our people going there and serving in their churches, we have become a trusted name in Kenya, and now even throughout East Africa. Since our beginnings over 15 years ago, God has used our partnership to launch new ministries in water procurement, health care, widow and orphan care, and most recently agricultural development. Those words sound so abstract when I say them, so let me give you some examples of what they look like.

IX.

Two weeks ago tomorrow, we stopped at Kibongato Tuberculosis National Hospital in Arusha, which is located near the northern border of Tanzania. We were in a room full of hospital administrators, many of them Muslim, who had never met us before, but had heard of the many health clinics we had established in Kenya and which had become self-sustaining.

They could tell by the way we interacted as people from two different countries that we had become the dearest of friends, as tight as sisters and brothers in the same family, but they didn’t know if we brought with us any hidden agendas.

I could feel the hospital staff checking us out as one of our partners introduced the members of our team. When it came to introducing Colette Cozean, one of Geneva’s Elders, our partner introduced her by telling them about all of her degrees and expertise in the field of medical engineering. For those of you who don’t know, Colette is an MD, PhD, and JD. Then he went on to share how she has been instrumental in the health

ministry of our partnership. He truly hammered it up. Knowing Colette, I'm sure she wanted to hide underneath her chair.

But that wasn't the end of the introduction. Upon hearing all this from our friends from Kenya, the Director of the Hospital stood up and said tongue in cheek, "We now welcome the Messiah to give her presentation on the treatment of drug resistant Tuberculosis."

I'm pretty sure the Director was just joking, but none of us from our team could laugh because weren't absolutely sure. So when Colette stood up, the first words out of her mouth were, "Thank you very much doctor, but I want to assure you that I know the Messiah, and I'm NOT him! Jesus Christ is my personal Lord and Savior."

We arrived at that hospital not knowing a person except for the Presbyterian pastor who was ministering in that region. The doctors and staff were understandably cautious about any hidden agendas we might be bringing. But by the end of Colette's presentation, their mood had changed completely. They wanted to know about this strange partnership of ours that had no other agenda than healing the sick, caring for widows and orphans, and bringing food and water to the hungry and thirsty. They were skeptical when we arrived, but by the time we left, they were asking us when we were going to return to begin our efforts there.

X.

There's something so disarming about the Kingdom of God. Everyone is invited and anyone can join. And then, when you do enter in, you have an agenda that is so noble it transforms the most ardent skeptics into interested learners.

For me, there's nothing more exciting and hope-producing than seeing how the kingdom of God is spreading throughout the world, in spite of the bad press we Christians sometimes bring to it.

XI.

I don't care if I'm flying on a plane to Nairobi or talking to one of our Kenya partners on the sideline of a soccer game in Mission Viejo while they're visiting us here, I have yet to meet a person who is not excited to hear about what God is doing through our partnership. And that goes for philanthropic pharmaceutical manufactures, water engineers of the United Nations, and the highest officials in the Kenyan government.

Because sisters and brothers over there and sisters and brothers over here have bowed to the same King for so many years together, just going before the Lord and asking him how we can serve together, people of all socio-economic backgrounds and political persuasions have recognized something special about us. We'll go anywhere God opens a door for us. Because we have no other agenda than to spread God's healing and peacemaking work, people with a desire to help the poor and sick in Africa are lining up to join us.

XII.

Still for all the ministries that we have facilitated, the one that hits home the most for me is to see our spiritual daughters at the Limuru Home for girls. I was there the day that they arrived back in August of 2007 when we dedicated the home. I think there were 48 girls then who stood before a crowd of over three thousand people. I remember them being shier than any children I had met before. They would almost cower as you went to shake their hand. One of them had a scar on her face where she had been cut by a man who left her for dead after raping her. Several of them were HIV positive.

But to see these girls today who run out to greet you with songs in their heart and joy in their eyes, girls who are eager to show you their homework and how they are advancing in school beyond anyone's expectations, to see these girls filled with love and hope and joy is the greatest reward I could ever imagine receiving.

As we traveled around East Africa and visited hospitals and universities and town councils I was blown away by how large this little partnership had grown. One surgeon described our partnership as "The Little Train that Could." You remember that children's story of the train that pulled a much bigger load than it was designed for? It said, "I think I can, I think I can, I think I can." That's the people of God when they put their minds together to heal this world in the name of the Lord.

In one mayor's office after another, in one hospital board room after another, there hung a poster celebrating our many years of partnership with the Presbyterian Church of East Africa. You know how cool it is to be twelve thousand miles away from home and see your sisters and brothers from your home congregation—and even your own daughters—peering out at you from a poster hung on a government official's wall?

XIII. [SLIDE #4]

If I ever questioned the far reaching and indomitable impact of the true King of the world, I won't question it again. In the farthest reaches of Africa, places where I've now been thanks to our agricultural projects, you will see little ramshackle churches with scraggly wood studs and tin roofs, bearing witness to a different type of King.

You can bow to this one, my friends. His kingdom has no borders and its end will never come. His agenda is to heal the broken hearted and bind up all their wounds. And believe me, there are plenty of broken-hearted people in the world, not just in Africa, but in our neighborhoods as well.

I have to admit that when I saw that poster hanging on the wall, it brought tears to my eyes. Against all the nay-saying and negativity and politics that go on this world, it is profoundly moving to see the impact of God's people when they serve their true King.

In the words of Forest Witcraft, "A hundred years from now it will not matter what my bank account was, the sort of house I lived in, or the kind of car I drove. But the world will be different because I was important in the life of someone who needed my love."

XIV.

A friend of mine told me about a church she visited recently. The preacher there preached that Christians should have a death wish, meaning that we should want to be with the Lord so much that we would be taken from this world.” I’m sorry to report, my friends, the Lord didn’t create this world to throw it away, and he didn’t call the world to himself so the world would remain how it is. You and I have a job to do here and now for as long as we have breath in our lungs.

The words of the Secretary General of the East Africa Presbyterian Church, who was with us here at Geneva in January, still ring in my ears. Referring to the post election violence in which many of his church members died as they tried to rescue people from fires set by rival tribes, he said this, “A Christian’s job is to show that Jesus Christ is Lord no matter how difficult life’s circumstances become. When the house is burning down all around you and flames are about to consume you, you still have a word of hope to bring. Until they carry your ashen body out on a stretcher, if you proclaim that Jesus Christ is Lord, you will have done your job.”

May the King foreshadowed by David’s reign be your King today and may he give you hope for this world in which his kingdom transcends human borders and even time itself. Amen.