

Last Words: The Death of David

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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1 Kings 2:1-11

So we have finally come to the last sermon in the David series. For those of you keeping score, this is the 12th sermon in the series. Appropriately, we'll finish with the passage that records David's death. I hope this sermon series has helped you see the deep complexity and richness of David's life. In the pages of 2 Samuel, David doesn't feel like a character from a hero story; he feels completely human. Over the course of these sermons we've seen David do things that are heroic and beautiful and gracious; we've also seen him do things that are pretty awful; things that make us shake our heads and say, "David, what in heaven's name were you thinking!" The David of the Bible is a real, messy person. His messiness and his internal contradictions reminds us of people we know. Maybe the messiness reminds us of ourselves.

This last story fits the pattern. David is coming to the end of his life. The end of his reign has not been peaceful. In fact, there has been a violent struggle between two of his children for the throne. Adonijah, his oldest claims the throne, but then Solomon, another son makes a counter claim. Solomon is David's choice and he comes out on top. Adonijah ends up dead. In our passage, David shares last words with Solomon. He gives advice and instruction to the son who will be King. Let's listen to these last words. Read 1 Kings 2:1-11

This passage totally fits the pattern of the Imperfect Anointed. On the one hand, David's advice to his son shows his faithfulness and his commitment and his wisdom. In the first four verses David calls Solomon to "walk in the ways of the Lord" to "follow his commandments and decrees." Do this and you and all the people will be blessed. David begins with the Lord. David centers Solomon on the Lord. David puts the Lord at the center of Israel's hope. These words remind us of all that is great about him. This is the David who stood up to Goliath armed only with faith and a slingshot. This is the David who wrote all those beautiful Psalms that still give words to the

faith in our hearts, words that we still sing, words that can still bring us to tears. This is the David who danced with all his might before the Lord. This is the David who brought the tribes of Israel together and made Israel strong. This David is rightly regarded as the greatest King in Israel's history.

But then the next 5 verses are more complicated. David gives instructions to Solomon about three men. David wants Solomon to bless one of the men. Barzillai is someone who helped David. He gave him food and encouragement when he was on the run from Absalom. So David tells Solomon to take care of Barzillai and his family. That's straightforward enough. David has very different intentions for the other two men. David essentially orders a hit on them. "Bring their grey head down to the grave in blood." Solomon, you can do it in a way that seems best to you, but I want you to off these guys. In his final recorded words, we hear David settle the score with a couple of fellow courtiers.

How do we feel about that? Is that OK? Should we approve of that? Just like last week, the text doesn't help us much. There is no editorial comment saying, 'this pleased the Lord,' or 'this displeased the Lord.' It's just reported as fact. So how do we assess David's hit list?

Let's look at the two men in question. The first you know well. Joab has been David's general from before he was king. Joab was a ruthless man. There are at least 4 times where he is involved with the murder of a defenseless person. His latest victim was Amasa. Amasa had been appointed the new commander of David's armies. David had demoted Joab and appointed Amasa instead. Joab didn't like that. So one day while they were out on the battlefield together, Joab made like he was greeting Amasa. He came close to him and said, "How are you my brother?" and pulled him in for an embrace, but while they were embracing, he picked up his dagger and stabbed him. Actually he did more than stab him; he disemboweled him. The text is pretty graphic. Joab did similar things with Abner, Uriah and Absalom. I will admit to you, I'm not a Joab fan. He did some good things, and he served David for a long time, but ultimately I would argue that Joab was in it for Joab. And David seems to agree because he orders his death.

The other man given a death sentence by David is Shimei. Shimei was a Benjaminite from Saul's clan, and when David was fleeing Jerusalem after

Absalom's coup, Shimei had mocked, ridiculed and insulted the king. You can read about that in 2 Samuel 16. As David and his entourage made a sad procession out of the city, Shimei yelled at them, "Get out, get out! You murderer! You scoundrel!" And then he pelted them with rocks and dirt. Later, when David returned, he fell at David's feet and begged for forgiveness, and, to his credit, David did forgive him. In fact, David said to him "You shall not die" and made an oath not to kill him. Shimei had been loyal ever since. But now David seems to have changed his mind. Technically David doesn't break his vow because he doesn't kill Shimei; Solomon does. But this order does seem to go against the spirit of that previous promise.

"Bring his gray hair down to the grave in blood." How do we feel about these last words? On the one hand it is definitely within David's right to pronounce these sentences. David is the King of Israel. The king of Israel is also the judge of Israel. And when the king made judgments and imposed sentences, capital punishment was one of his options.

Furthermore, as he made his judgments, the law of God gave him guidelines. In Exodus 21:24, the law said that when you pursue justice you should demand an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. You needed that rule because sin upset the balance of the universe. When someone committed a sin and hurt someone, and that hurt was not addressed, that put things out of balance. It led to more evil. When just punishment was administered, when the eye was repaid for an eye and the tooth was repaid for a tooth, balance was restored and peace came to the land. Until that balance was restored, the blood of the victim cried out from the ground. David's death sentences here could be understood as an attempt to restore balance, to even the score, to restore balance to the universe.

But I will confess that there is also something about these executions that makes me uneasy. Some of that unease comes from Shimei's death sentence which seems to go beyond an eye for an eye. More of that unease comes from comparing David to his descendant. Whenever we interpret the Old Testament, we do it in the light of Jesus. Because everything in this book focuses on the saving work of Jesus. All these stories point to Jesus. And what happens when you compare Jesus' death and the words Jesus speaks, with David's death and the words David speaks? Does Jesus die with a hit list?

Does Jesus die with a list of scores to settle. No. It's the opposite. Jesus dies by saying, "Father, forgive them they don't know what they are doing." David dies in an outpouring of vengeance; Jesus dies in an outpouring of forgiveness. David seeks justice by spilling the blood of the sinners; Jesus gains justice by giving his blood for the sinners. Both David and Jesus die with an eye on settling the score, but Jesus does that by offering himself. When you hold up Jesus' death to David's death, the contrast is striking.

What is that contrast about? What does it mean? I've been wrestling with that all week and I think it shows the movement of God through Scripture. I think it shows the direction of God's plan. We talk about God working his purposes out; I think this shows the direction of God's purposes. And the movement is towards mercy.

If you read the Bible carefully, you can see God moving towards mercy, and you can see that movement on several fronts. You see the move towards mercy in the way Jesus dies as compared to David: instead of "bring his gray hair down to the grave in blood, you get, 'Father forgive them.' You also see the move towards mercy in the teaching of the sermon on the mount. In an attempt to do justice, David is operating by the law of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. Jesus comes to bring justice too, but he says, "You have heard it said, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But I tell you, don't resist an evil person. If someone slaps you on the cheek turn to them the other also." That's not the spirit that animates David in our passage, but it is the spirit that God calls for in us. From Exodus 21 to the Sermon on the Mount, there is a movement towards mercy and forbearance. You see that move towards mercy in Romans 12:19-21. "Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath. As it is written it is mine to avenge; I will repay says the Lord. On the contrary: if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty give him something to drink." This too is not the approach David takes in this passage. But God is changing things. He is moving us towards mercy.

Which doesn't mean justice and punishment are being abandoned and that evil people just get off the hook. Read the end of the book of Revelation and you know that's not true. There will be a judgment and at that judgment every sin will be paid for. The moral balance of the universe will be restored.

Every injustice will be dealt with but not by a bunch of imperfect judges like us who are bound to get justice wrong; the justice will be done by Jesus whose justice is perfect. Revelation shows us the last judgment, Jesus is the judge not us, and it tells us a lot of blood will be spilled, but even then, much of the blood will be his.

When you consider this story and measure it against the story of Jesus, we can say that the arc of the universe is long and it bends towards mercy. And that mercy is not just a concept or an idea or a rule to follow; it is a movement of God. It's how God is working in the middle of the mess of your life.

When I was on sabbatical this summer, I spent some time in Montgomery, Alabama touring some of the civil rights memorials and museums down there. That was part of a tour sponsored by the Calvin Institute for Christian Worship. During that time, we met a young black woman who was a local artist and activist and we heard the story of her Dad. I can't remember his name and I didn't write it down, so let's call him James.

James was born in Montgomery in 1950, which means he began life in a segregated, racially charged world. When he was 13 years old, the Birmingham church bombing took place. In Birmingham, Alabama, 4 men planted a bomb under the steps of the 16th Street Baptist Church. It went off on a Sunday morning killing four young girls: Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson, and Carol Denise McNair. The perpetrators of this crime somehow managed to avoid prosecution for the crime. It wasn't until 1977 that the men were convicted and jailed. They walked free for 15 years. This enraged young James, and by his own account he spent most of his teens and early 20s as an angry young man. He dreamed about revenge. He thought about finding where the bombers lived and making them pay for their crime. He fantasized about bringing their gray heads down to the grave in blood. He lived in a state of rage.

In his early 20's James met Jesus. He became a Christian. He gave himself to the gospel. In fact, he decided to study for the ministry and ended up serving as a prison chaplain in Alabama's prison system. He spent his days giving spiritual counsel to inmates. Years later he was called in to minister to an inmate who was dying and needed his services. As he started to care for

the man, he realized that it was one of the four bombers. It was one of the four men who had been the focus of his rage. It was one of the four men he dreamed of killing, only now God had worked it so that instead of killing the man, he was called on to speak words of life and hope and grace. Which he did. It was a profound and emotional moment for him. It was a moment that pulled back the curtain that showed him that God was alive and that he was working in his life, moving him from rage and vengeance to mercy.

Do you see how that movement from vengeance to mercy in James' life is the same merciful movement we see from the story of David to the story of Jesus? God was at work in the life of James moving him from rage to mercy. God was at work in the life of his people moving them from the eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth world of David to the deeper mercy of the cross of Jesus. And that same merciful movement is in your life too. I know it doesn't always feel that way. Sometimes it feels messy and God is hard to find in the mess, but it was no different for David. Things got messy for him and did he sometimes lose a sense of where God was in the mess? Yes! Read the Psalms. He was often perplexed. But God is at work. His mercy is moving. It's a strong mercy that can clean up messy lives like David's. It's a strong mercy that can clean up messy lives like yours. It's a strong mercy that can bring down evil and open up graves and make everything new.

And when, in the middle of your mess, you walk in that mercy, when you live with that mercy, you are walking in the right direction. You are walking with the grain of God's providence. Which is to say you are walking towards Jesus, which is to say you are walking home.

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