

The House of David

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2 Samuel 7:1-17; Romans 16:25-27; Luke 1:26-38

“[T]he Lord will make you a house. . . .” -- 2 Samuel 7:11

The Christian church recognized early in its history that one of the dynamics uniting its Old and New Testaments is God’s fulfilling of promises in unexpected ways. In both the story of Jesus as we find it in the gospels and in the story of Israel as we find it in the First Testament, God repeatedly up-ends people’s expectations about what God wants and how we are to live. The Bible is full of stories that keep us just a little off balance, so that the story comes out okay, but not as we expected.

That’s the dynamic behind the vision that the prophet Nathan was instructed to deliver to King David in our first reading. David proposes to build a temple for Yahweh – the Lord, as he’s commonly called in the Old Testament – but Yahweh says he’ll build a house for David instead. There are two meanings of “house” at play here: a house made of cedar and stone – a temple, in other words – and a house made of living human beings – a dynasty, in other words. David gets his house, and Yahweh gets his house, so the story comes out okay, but not as we initially expected.

David was the great unifier of the twelve tribes of Israel into a monarchy that ushered in Israel’s golden age. Despite overwhelming odds against it, the Israelite tribes managed, under David’s leadership, literally to pull themselves together long enough to become a modest empire, and to step out onto the stage of world history with Egypt and Assyria and Babylonia and other empires of the ancient world.

And it all happened because of David – his personality, his gifts, his skills, and also perhaps because of his treachery and ruthlessness. The Bible doesn’t gloss David’s faults, but despite those flaws, David became in the memory of biblical Israel what George Washington is to us – nay, what George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and both the Roosevelts are to us, all rolled into one out-sized personality. And like Parson Weems’ famous tale of the young George Washington and his cherry tree, the tales of David’s exploits in love, war, and statecraft had the same kernel of historical truth enclosed in layers of legend and exaggeration that all truly great figures inspire.

David, as we all remember from Sunday School, was the youngest son of Jesse of Bethlehem, and youngest sons in patriarchal cultures then and now were virtually invisible. The only sons that matter in a patriarchal culture are the first two -- “the heir and the spare” as they’re sometimes called. Prince William and Prince Harry, to put it in contemporary terms, and now that the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge have one son and may soon have another, Prince Harry’s chances of becoming heir to the British throne have all but disappeared. And since the responsibility for maintaining the British throne through the House of Windsor no longer falls to him, Prince Harry can live a playboy’s life of the rich and famous in peace if he chooses.

The house of David was the dynastic empire begun by David about a thousand years before Jesus, and as empires go, it was a pretty modest affair. The twelve tribes

whom David was able to unite in the kingdom of Israel covered an area, from top to bottom, of only about a hundred and fifty miles – about from here to Columbus – and at its widest point, east to west, of only about a third of that, roughly from here to Vermilion. Biblical Israel, David's empire, was a pretty rinky-dink operation at its best, and it wasn't at its best for long. Those very independent-minded tribes survived as a united monarchy under only two kings – David and Solomon – and then they got into it about what it meant to be Israel – that is, the people who wrestle with God – and they split apart, with the ten northern tribes keeping the name Israel, and the two southern tribes, Judah and Benjamin, taking the name Judah, which became Judea, which became Judaism. That's three thousand years of ancient Near Eastern history in less than a minute. I left out a few details.

And a few years ago, archaeologists digging in northern Israel unearthed an inscription that appears to be from the Aramaeans, one of ancient Israel's enemies, and it seems to mention the *bet dawid*, the house of David. So however much the biblical writers may have exaggerated the significance of their own dynasty relative to ancient powers, there is nonetheless some evidence that there was a line of rulers from David that even Israel's enemies recognized.

And it is from that line of rulers – the house of David – that Jesus came. One of the relatively few things the gospels agree on is that Jesus was a descendant of King David, and to be “of the house and lineage of David,” as Luke puts it in his narrative of Jesus's birth, is to have certain expectations placed on one, just as we hold certain expectations of people named Kennedy or Bush.

The house of David had delivered great things to the people of Israel, who believed that they were chosen by God to minister to the world. Jerusalem became the city of David, and although David didn't build the temple that became the center of Jewish life for almost a millennium, his son Solomon did. And for hundreds of years, the Jewish people believed that the Lord would protect his temple and his Davidic dynasty and his chosen people.

But history clobbered belief. Late in the eighth century B.C.E., the Assyrians clobbered the ten northern tribes and scattered them into exile, and then, about 150 years later, the Babylonians did the same thing to the southern kingdom of Judah, burning Jerusalem and its temple to the ground, and marching the Davidic ruler off in chains to Babylon. And according to the arrangement of the books in the Jewish Bible, what we call the Old Testament, that's where the story ends, with the Jewish people waiting for the deliverer from the house of David who would restore the glory of Israel.

And about 600 years after Jehoiachin was marched into exile by Nebuchadnezzar, a group of Jews from Galilee came to believe that God had done just that. Today we call ourselves Christians, but in those days, we were simply known as followers of Jesus, a carpenter-turned-rabbi-and-healer from Nazareth who was a descendant of David. This group of Jews, with names like Peter and Andrew and James and Paul, believed that Jesus was the deliverer – the Messiah, the Christ – who would restore the house of David, so that God's people could be God's people again. Those Jews who became Jesus's disciples believed that they had experienced miraculous power in his presence, and that he had such profound insight into what it meant to be chosen by God that his life and teachings could restore Israel to greatness. He became for them the true King of the Jews.

And like all human venturers, they were both right and not right. The kingdom of Israel was not restored by armies or assassins or collaborators with Rome. It was restored as a new Israel, people who considered themselves chosen by God to continue the work of their ancestors Abraham and David.

They were first called Christians – that is, messianists – not in Jerusalem, but in

Antioch, according to the book of Acts, which is in modern Turkey. The Jewish religious establishment in Jerusalem couldn't risk the wrath of Rome by allowing this disruptive movement of messianic Jews to remain so near the center of power, especially after the Roman authorities executed its leader. We Christians often portray the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem at the time of Jesus as willfully blind to divine truth, but perhaps, in this season of generosity, we might take a more spiritually generous view of what those Jewish leaders thought they were trying to do, which was to preserve their faith. When confronted with threats to our own religion, we Christians have been just as intolerant and repressive as any Jewish high priest.

And so the house of David moved beyond its Jerusalem base, opening itself up to new possibilities, while never forgetting its prophetic mission of peace with justice. A new understanding of chosenness emerged in that branch of the family tree, and although we Christians and Jews tend to think of ourselves as quite different, in point of theological fact, we have far more in common than we often realize.

The house of David has many rooms, and there are many ways to work for justice and peace for the entire world. Advent, with its emphasis on Jesus's Jewish roots, reminds us that God is continually surprising us with new ways of being faithful. As we celebrate our Christmas traditions in the coming days, let us pray for the grace to keep those traditions as fresh and flexible as the evergreens we use to mark them.