

The Shepherd King: Last Words – 8/9/15

Scripture: 2 Samuel 23:1-7 (3-4)

Unison: Psalm 132

HYMNS 1) #407 “How Firm a Foundation” 2) #23 “There’s A Wideness in God’s Mercy” 3) #410 “If You But Trust in God to Guide You”

CALL TO WORSHIP

Leader: The Spirit of the Lord speaks to us, teaching lessons that endure.

People: The King of kings calls to us, beckoning us to follow.

L: The Light of lights shines on us, illuminating our minds.

P: The spirit of the Lord speaks to us, leading us into life.

All: Let us worship God!

INVOCATION & LORD’S PRAYER

Rock of Israel, you are the foundation of our very being, yet we often turn to our own devices instead of trusting or relying on your strength. Forgive us, Lord, when we place our trust in earthly things, and help us to build our hopes and dreams and future on the solid foundation of Christ. Hear us as we pray: “Our Father...”

THE SERMON

Last words: This passage proclaims itself to be the last words of David. Of course, there are other passages that also make this claim....David had a lot of recorded last words, as befitted his significance to Israel, and to the big story of God’s faithfulness to people who struggle to be faithful, and to the even bigger story of the people’s hope that God’s messiah would one day come to restore right relationships between God and people and also among people.

In preparation, I got curious about last words as a genre. Because it is a genre, and there are a lot of last words lists and articles. Really a lot! And for some people, several different sets of last words. As with David, the ones

who had lots of last words had people around them whose duty it was to hear and record every utterance. For others, it's a matter of recollection, of a colorful story, subject to embellishment or mis-remembering. Some are metaphysical. Some are crude. Some surely were not spontaneous, and it's hard to believe some were ever actually said. Many have to do with ultimate concern. I'll let you look them up yourselves, if interested, on wikiquotes or another site on the internet. It's quite a rabbit hole of reading!

I remember the last thing each of my parents said to me; not their very last words ever, but pretty close. "I love you" each of them said. Even now, that recollection moves me to tears and reminds me how much I loved them too.

What is notable about last words is they are offered in the moment when all the distractions of life have been stripped away, and only what is important is left. And if you look up those lists of last words, you will see that for the large part, what was important to most of these famous people were their relationships with those whom they loved, and with God.

So here we have one set of David's recorded last words, and they are interesting. In seminary, when we were taught to evaluate and analyze and study scripture in preparation for preaching, one of the very first things we were instructed to do was to figure out who exactly is talking. Imagine it like a movie script: we were asked to define what is the scene? Who is there? In a script, whose name would be in front of what is being said? In that spirit, I color coded this passage. It was pretty simple, much more so than some of the gospel passages. This scripture portion begins with the narrator, speaking as the author of this historical collection of stories of David's kingship, recalling what is to come next:

2 Samuel 23:1-7 - The Last Words of David

(Narrator) Now these are the last words of David:

The oracle of David, son of Jesse,
the oracle of the man whom God exalted,
the anointed of the God of Jacob,
the favorite of the Strong One of Israel:

The narrator sets up the scene, by characterizing David: the man who had a very special relationship with God, now offering an oracle. Which is to say, this is not just a dying statement like "I am thirsty" or "what is the time." It is an introduction to a prophetic utterance. Then, in this narration, David

himself is quoted, setting up this prophetic utterance:

(David) "The spirit of the Lord speaks through me,
his word is upon my tongue.
The God of Israel has spoken,
the Rock of Israel has said to me:"

Then the narration switches to God's words, given to David to report for the sake of all the people, not just in that moment but in all moments. And what God has to tell us all through David is next:

(God) One who rules over people justly,
ruling in the fear of God,
is like the light of morning,
like the sun rising on a cloudless morning,
gleaming from the rain on the grassy land.

Now THAT is some beautiful poetry, is it not? We'll be back to this in a moment. In the passage, David then breaks in with his own interpretive comment:

(David) Is not my house like this with God?
For he has made with me an everlasting covenant,
ordered in all things and secure.
Will he not cause to prosper
all my help and my desire?
But the godless are all like thorns that are thrown away;
for they cannot be picked up with the hand;
to touch them one uses an iron bar
or the shaft of a spear.
And they are entirely consumed in fire on the spot.

Oh, David. This is the man who can really tell us something about Godly and ungodly behavior because he's done it all and seen it all. He has led God's people to greatness; Israel under David's rule stretched far to the north and the south and the east from what it is today. He wrote songs of praise and lament and prayers of repentance and petition that we use all the time, many of the Psalms. And he was also the king who had his captain Uriah

killed so he could cover up his infidelity, having slept with Uriah's wife Bathsheba and gotten her pregnant. He's the man whose own sons went to war against him. He's the elderly monarch who became cold when he slept and required a young woman in his bed every night to keep him warm.

David is at the end of his life, a very diminished king, a very diminished man, when he receives this oracle, when he makes this statement. I thought of this when we went to see the really compelling movie "Mr. Holmes" last week. It was compelling enough that I'm now reading the book it's based on; it's a powerful story, wonderfully told and beautifully acted, about Sherlock Holmes at the age of 93, when his powers of recollection and interpretation are fading. When he is no longer detecting. When his fame is all about the Sherlock Holmes recorded in Dr. Watson's stories, with their embellishments, rather than about who he actually IS at this point. He is distressed. He is dismayed, and haunted by his last case, a failure, and by his lack of emotional connection now that both Watson and his brother Mycroft Holmes have passed away. And so Sherlock Holmes must consider his relationships, and what is the meaning of the totality of his life, and of the stories about his life, and how he will be remembered. I won't tell you more; I hope you'll consider going to see it. I mention it because David, in this passage, at this point in his life, is like Mr. Holmes: forced back onto what he has done and been, and onto what is really important, in the end.

David is a very imperfect vessel of God's word and love and blessing....but he has been chosen by God to be a vessel of those things nonetheless. David is an example to us all, not of what to do, and not even of what NOT to do, but mainly of the way that God remains faithful in relationship with us and how God is always, always seeking to redeem each of us, and ALL of us.

"Is not my house like this with God? For he has made with me an everlasting covenant, ordered in all things and secure." In this context, David's breaking into the prophecy with his own comments, is NOT bragging—though David has some mad bragging skills—it is still part of the prophetic speech, though colored by David himself. God has made a promise, establishing David's house, his descendants, his line, as royalty, rulers over God's people on this earth. And what, in this prophecy, are the characteristics of the one who would be the true ruler, the truly faithful one? Justice. Mercy. Humility. Doesn't that sound familiar? It's what the prophet Micah, hundreds of years after David's time, tells us is God's desire for each

of us: that we are to do justice, love kindness (or mercy) and walk humbly with God. It's the message that every prophet from David's time on brings to God's people, along with the words of hope that a messiah will come, and will be all those things, not in our pale reflected way, but with glory like the sunrise on a cloudless morning, glory reflected sparkling on every blade of grass, on every part of creation. This one will rule in David's seat forever, with justice and righteousness; bringing the whole of creation around to right relationship. This one will be, in short, the light of the world.

Well, you know who that is. We call ourselves part of his family, part of his line, part of his work of justice and mercy and humble obedience: Christians. He was born in Bethlehem, David's home town, and traveled a redemptive path to and through Jerusalem, the city where David established his throne. Proclaiming his birth, the angel said to the shepherds, "for unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." Jesus. His name means, God Saves. We follow him. We serve him. He is the truly righteous ruler, and we have beheld his glory, as John says, the glory of the Father's only son. We seek to reflect that glory, aware that we can mistakenly think it is our own, but still trying, like David, to get it right. We are still experiencing, like David, the times of challenge and correction that come from God. Still proclaiming, like David, that God is always faithful, always working to redeem the world, always inviting us into that process. As John says, the true light has come into the world, a light that shines even in the darkness, and is never, ever overcome by that darkness.

We are called by that light. We are reminded, by the prophets, to do justice, to be merciful, and to be humble in the presence of God. We are commanded by Jesus to love God with everything we've got, and to love one another. To be light in the world, reflecting the glory of the one who is like the sun rising into a clear sky. To become the family of Christ, part of the house of David, united in covenant with one another and with God, forever.

May the God who is perfect in love guide you and bless you and forgive you and lead you all the days of your life, and may the words "I love you" be the last and greatest words of your lives.

Amen!