

July 4th, 2021

2 Samuel 5:9-10 “Marking Our Territory”

I know I've said this before, but Protestant ministers in the U.S. will do almost *anything* to avoid preaching the first two Sundays in July. Especially pastors in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Why? Because our ethos of diversity that we so enthusiastically embrace and affirm in our denomination will be put to the test like no other time of the year. Why, might you ask? Here's an example: In worship on either of the first two Sundays of July, if you sing patriotic hymns ... and you know the ones I'm talking about ... *Battle Hymn of the Republic*, *God Bless America* ... the classics. If you sing those songs the “God favors no nation over others” people will be offended and may even threaten to leave the church. But if you *don't* sing patriotic songs, the “God has uniquely blessed America to be the example of Christian values throughout the world” people will be offended and may threaten to leave. “Oh, that only happens in other less-enlightened Disciple churches Jesse. Not ours.” And if you believe that, I've got an extended warranty for your car I'd like to sell you. And it's the worst when Independence Day falls on a Sunday ... like *today*. It only happens every 7 years which, oddly enough, coincides with the average tenure of a Protestant minister. Me? Listen, I have learned from some of the smartest, savviest pastors in our denomination how to handle this situation. I'm proud to say that I have followed in the footsteps of wise long-tenured Disciple pastors here in our Region like Heather Hennessey, Ted Firch, Larry Love, Ellis Martin and others whose churches are known and celebrated throughout the region for their diversity. As per their example, I have volunteered to direct, keynote, or serve as chaplain for our Region's outdoor ministry program, which just happens to hold camps during the first two weeks of July. I've done this for 7 of the 13 years that I've been here. Or I've gone on Sabbatical. Or vacation. Notice I labeled these fellow long-tenured pastors as “savvy and wise” not “brave.”

But here I am on Sunday, July 4, 2021 standing in front of you, because of poor planning on my part and not paying attention to what's coming up on my calendar. However, because I am committed to fairness and equality, I'm going to say something that might make *everyone* mad. See, I think that every major prophetic figure in the Bible, especially Jesus, warned God's people to always choose God over Empire and that every one of Earth's kingdoms, no matter how noble and God-fearing they imagine or proclaim to be, has been corrupted by sin and has fallen short of God's glory. This space that we occupy here on 295 East Washington Avenue has been set apart as God's house. Not Caesar's house. God's house. We get to deal with Caesar 6 days a week. The 7th day is God's day and God's day only. At the same time, I am proud to be a citizen of this country and I value the freedom that I've been given to choose to worship or not worship wherever and whenever I want. And I'm proud of my middle son, Cameron, for answering the call to defend this country and the freedom that we've worked so hard to achieve. So, here's what we're going to do today. We're going to just keep on plowing through the lectionary and continue with the story of what happened to Israel when they demanded a king right after God told them not to. I have no agenda today. Our founders in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) often said, "Where the scriptures speak, we speak, and where the scriptures are silent, we are silent." And remember, we are the first American-born Protestant denomination, so let's let the scriptures speak this morning.

A few weeks ago, we were introduced to David, son of Jesse, who God anointed to be the *future* King of Israel. God did this because Saul, the *first* King of Israel, was a living, breathing disaster. Then David became the King of Judah but not the entire nation of Israel. This week we read about David uniting the 12 tribes of Israel and becoming their King. So yes, on the day that America celebrates her independence from a monarchy, we're studying about a nation that is entering into monarchy. Go ahead and say that, "Variety is the spice of life." But I think *irony* is much spicier. For the last year in Bible study, we've been exploring the rise of the nation of Israel. One of our key questions is, "What does it

look like to be under God's reign and what kind of human leadership is necessary to make it happen?" Week after week the answer to that question is, "The people can't seem to get their heads wrapped around it ... *at all* ... but God is faithful even when we aren't."

So if we're going to look at what kind of human leadership is necessary to live under God's reign, let's take a look at the one who is considered to be the greatest King Israel has ever seen. The verse from this week's text that stands out to me the most is verse 10 – "And David became greater and greater for the Lord God of hosts, was with him." The NIV says, "And he became more and more powerful, because the Lord God Almighty was with him." The Common English Bible says, "David became a great and strong ruler, because the Lord All-Powerful was on his side." See, this verse is a big foreshadowing moment for David's future reign over Israel. Spoiler alert, things are going to be going downhill fast. And it's not going to be a matter of whether God was with David, but rather "How much longer will David remain with God?" The more David centers himself on his own power, the farther he gets from centering himself on his faith in God.

The David we saw in the story of David and Goliath was motivated by his unwavering faith in God. No one else in Israel had enough faith in God to answer the challenge to fight their enemy's champion, Goliath. Including King Saul! So young, inexperienced David came along not thinking at all like a typical earthly king. He was thinking like a shepherd. How does a shepherd protect the flock against the wolves and lions? With a staff, a sling, a pocket full of stones, and a whole lot of faith in God's power. When David finally became King of Israel things were going well because he still thought and acted like a shepherd. Things began to collapse, though, when David started focusing on his own power as an earthly king. The guy who, when he was younger, was not afraid to take on Goliath won't even lead his own troops into battle anymore because he wants to sit back and enjoy the luxuries that come along with being a King. Which goes to show that the more you rely on

your own power, the easier it is for you to justify unjust and corrupt actions. David is best when he rules like a shepherd.

Throughout the scriptures, the greatest leaders are the ones who care for God's people like a shepherd. Think about it. Moses and Joseph both spent time as shepherds and used shepherd principles to lead the people and care for "the least of these." Jesus, on many occasions, teaches people that *God* is like a shepherd, and even refers to himself as the "Good shepherd," the one who lays his life down for his sheep. Who were the first ones to bear witness to the Christ child? Shepherds. David's most famous Psalm, the 23rd, starts out, "The Lord is my shepherd." That's what God's reign looks like, and that's what sets God's reign apart from all other nations. Shepherds are called to both nurture and lead. They must *care* for the most vulnerable, but must also *guide* the most vulnerable if the flock is to flourish. In David's reign as King of Israel, when does he get in trouble? When he stops caring for "the least of these." But I'm getting way ahead of myself here. We've still got another week of "shepherd David" to go until things start falling apart. So let's see what kind of lesson we can get out of today's scripture.

I think this story reminds us that we are *not* "the" nation of God. We are a nation *under* God. And as we see in the story of David's reign, a nation under God can be aspirational at best and often far from what many consider reality. See, I think we are quite aware of what our challenges are as a nation. But can we choose to speak to these challenges truthfully? If we can't be the "Davids" of the world ... if we are not the leaders and policy makers ... maybe we can be the prophetic voices like Nathan who spoke truth to David when he strayed from God. Prophets are the ones who speak up when the kings and rulers stop being shepherds and forget about the people ... the flock. It is helpful to be familiar with what issues arise when our leaders stop caring about people. What happens when leaders stop caring for the widow and the orphan and the immigrant in the land? The nations start falling apart. The nations stop holding up their end of the covenant to be the people of

and under God. And “the people of God” is as much as a responsibility as it is a privilege.

On days like today, we really like to talk about the *privilege* of “living in the promise land,” but I think it’s just as, if not more, important to emphasize the responsibility. One of two things have already or will take place in many of our churches today. Some church leaders are going to focus on our nation’s flaws and how we have fallen short of Jesus’ values and teachings. In other words, they’re going to spend their time and energy laying some shame and blame on their congregations. Other church leaders are going to be waving the American flag and laying shame and blame on people whose patriotic proclivities aren’t up to a particular standard. Neither of these responses are helpful as far as I’m concerned because shame and blame *rarely* change people’s hearts. We will only become a nation under God when we are able to humble ourselves and honestly look at our past, our present, and our future and to seek God’s guidance along the way.