

“How Are the Children?”  
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau  
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church  
Psalm 150 and 2 Samuel 5:1-5; 6:1-5, 15, 17-19  
October 20, 2019 - Children’s Sabbath Sunday

In order to make sense of today’s reading from the book of 2 Samuel, we need to set it up just a bit with a very quick review of some of the history of the twelve tribes of Israel.

After wandering in the desert and then entering the Promised Land, the people were led by a series of judges. Then they started to beg God to give them a king, just like everyone else had. Their God warned them about the dangers of royalty, but they were insistent. God anointed Saul as their king, and that worked out for a bit. But then Saul went off the rails and God had David anointed as the king of Israel. Problem was, Saul remained in power. So David was the rogue king leading a group of outcasts and saving the day while Saul was in a down spiral. It’s all very Game of Thrones-y. Then Saul died, and the elders of the tribe of Judah decided David would be their king. The rest of the tribes are looking for a king as our passage begins.

Our reading will then skip ahead a bit and we’ll briefly hear about David bringing the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem as he makes that city his capital. As a reminder, the Ark was a big fancy chest that contained the tablets with the Ten Commandments on them and traveled with the Israelites as a powerful manifestation of the presence of God. It’s also a piece of uncontrollable holy power. When it falls into the wrong hands or is treated with disrespect, it can become very dangerous. Here David and company will finally give the Ark a permanent home.

With a people in need of a king and an Ark in need of a home, listen for the reading from 2 Samuel:

Then all the tribes of Israel came to David at Hebron, and said, “Look, we are your bone and flesh. For some time, while Saul was king over us, it was you who led out Israel and brought it in. The LORD said to you: It is you who shall be shepherd of my people Israel, you who shall be ruler over Israel.” So all the elders of Israel came to the king at Hebron; and King David made a covenant with them at Hebron before the LORD, and they anointed David king over Israel. David was thirty years old when he began to reign, and he reigned forty years. At Hebron he reigned over Judah seven years and six months; and at Jerusalem he reigned over all Israel and Judah thirty-three years.

David again gathered all the chosen men of Israel, thirty-thousand. David and all the people with him set out and went from Baale-judah, to bring up from there the ark of God, which is called by the name of the LORD of hosts who is enthroned on the cherubim. They carried the ark of God on a new cart, and brought it out of the house of Abinadab, which was on the hill. Uzzah and Ahio, the sons of Abinadab, were driving the new cart with the ark of God; and Ahio went in front of the ark. David and all the house of Israel were dancing before the LORD with all their might, with songs and lyres and harps and tambourines and castanets and cymbals. David danced before the LORD with all his might; David was girded with a linen priestly vest [called an ephod]. They

brought in the ark of the LORD, and set it in its place, inside the tent that David had pitched for it; and David offered burnt offerings and offerings of well-being before the LORD. When David had finished offering the burnt offerings and the offerings of well-being, he blessed the people in the name of the LORD of hosts, and distributed food among all the people, the whole multitude of Israel, both men and women, to each a cake of bread, a portion of meat, and a cake of raisins. Then all the people went back to their homes.

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

So that was a pretty successful news cycle for King David!

The kingdom is united, the ark has a home, the people have a capital, there's been a big celebration with dancing and music, and all the people have been fed.

Unfortunately, it won't be all joy and adulation during his reign. His royal family will be filled with metaphorical backstabbing and literal front-stabbing and betrayal. David will abuse power and fall into all sorts of sinister behavior and horrible treatment of his own people. He, along with most of the kings that follow him, will turn into exactly the kind of corrupt, conniving monarchs that God tried to warn the Israelites about.

Every leader from antiquity to today has had successes and shadow sides. For King David, that split is so dramatic. He is the hero of Israel, the little guy with big faith. He is the lecherous king, manipulative and self-interested.

David was at his worst when he was acting the way that kings are expected to act, with power at the heart of every move and self-preservation a mandatory outcome.

David was at his absolute best when he was not acting like a king at all. He was the true hero when the trappings of power didn't quite fit, or when he shed them altogether. Literally, he was the shepherd who was too small for the armor. He used a sling instead of a sword and defeated the giant Goliath. When things went downhill with King Saul, and David had the opportunity to kill the king, he resisted.

Here he dances like nobody's watching in ecstatic praise as the Word of God is restored. He has brought the people of God together and has taken on the role of shepherd, using his power to protect them, to guide them, and to feed them. He has taken custody of the ark for the people and established as the center of power a place that was politically neutral, favoring none of the tribes. The best side of David comes out when he is more improvisational than calculating, more spontaneous than manipulative, more joyously faithful and impractical than prudent and powerful.<sup>1</sup>

God chose and anointed the ruddy, awkward shepherd to give these people the best possible shot if they were to have a king. When David is that shepherd, when he abandons decorum in favor of faithfulness, when he embodies his faith, when he doesn't care how goofy he looks, he ends up following God and

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<sup>1</sup> With thanks to the Narrative Cast Podcast for 10/20/19

blessing God's people.

When he is drawn into the web of power and opulence and acting kingly, he goes painfully astray and the Israelites suffer.

As a junior in college, I was incredibly fortunate to get to study abroad. Let me take this moment to tell all these bright and talented students that if you ever have the opportunity to study, even if just for a short time, in another culture, in another part of the world, take it. Make it work. There is no substitute for the experience of being a foreigner and having to figure things out and needing to rely on the tremendous grace of people who do not look or talk or know the world in the way that you do.

As part of those travels, I got to visit a Maasai village in Kenya. The Maasai are known for having generations of warriors who are both powerful and wise. Their villages are popular for tourists for the way they have maintained the traditional culture and way of life while integrating the opportunities of interaction with Western culture. The Maasai are Kenya's pride, ambassadors for Kenyan culture and symbols of strength.

Maasai warriors still welcome each other with a traditional greeting: "And how are the children?" The traditional response is, "All the children are well." The question asked and its response are about the peace and safety of the community. That's how you check the overall health of your village. Is the care of the young and powerless a priority?<sup>2</sup>

If the children are well, the community is well. If the youngest mouths are fed, everything else can be managed. If the children are not well, the society is not well.

There are just north of one million children in the state of Alabama, enough to fill Jordan-Hare Stadium twelve and a half times. Of those children, enough of them are living in poverty to fill Bryant-Denny Stadium more than two and a half times. I'll save you the conversion math: that's nearly one out of every four children in the state living in poverty.<sup>3</sup>

*And how are the children?*

When David acted like a king was expected to act, the people suffered.  
If the children are suffering, who are the people of God acting like today?  
Like royals?  
Like Americans?  
Or is this what we come to expect of Christians?

Whatever it is, it isn't working.  
Perhaps there's too much decorum, and not enough faithfulness, too much faith talking and not enough

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.presbypeacefellowship.org/ppfers-engage-in-ecumenical-advocacy-days-2017/>

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.childrensdefense.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/CITS-2019\\_Alabama.pdf](https://www.childrensdefense.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/CITS-2019_Alabama.pdf)

faith-embodiment. We don't want to cause a ruckus, to stand out, to risk being noticed for noticing when creation is suffering. We don't want to disrupt our lives — though the Gospel demands it. We don't want to disrupt our neighborhoods, even when the children aren't well. We have chosen calculations and prudence and power instead of spontaneity and improvisation and dancing like the very Word of God is within our grasp.

It makes absolutely zero sense for a retired engineer to ride a bicycle across this great continent. It would be easier to stay home and write a check and not bother any of his fellow church members. But the Word of God can inspire profound acts of sacred foolishness, making you dance around in a linen ephod or spandex bicycle shorts. [EPC Elder Don Hagan will embark on a 3,000-mile bicycle ride over 52 days in the spring to raise funds for the Presbyterian Home for Children.]

Jesus had no royal palace to find retreat. He walked and walked, telling stories and comical parables and doing a ton of crowd work, improvising as he was asked questions and turning on a dime when he saw someone suffering. The question was never, “Is this appropriate?” or “Is this technically legal in the eyes of my religion or the state?” or “How will it look to the neighbors?”

Instead, the questions were, “Is this merciful and just?” and “Is this consistent with the covenant made by a God of love and grace?” and “Who is your neighbor?” and “How are the children?”

People of faith, let your hair down, if you're lucky enough to have hair.

Seek the ways of creativity and flexibility and noticing.

See people instead of problems.

Ask how the children are — and not just your own.

Move in step with the Word — the baffling, weird, inspiring, life-changing Word.

Dance with abandon and laugh with purpose.

And sing “Alleluia” loudly enough to startle your neighbor. Amen.