

Lent 5A: 2 Samuel 7:1-17
Church of the Good Shepherd
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In the five years since the wedding of Prince Harry and Megan Markle, the news has been repeatedly punctuated by gossip surrounding the Prince and his actress wife. Why Americans would be interested in the goings-on of a royal family who will never rule us is unclear. But the literal marriage of royalty and celebrity has proved irresistible, drawing attention from Americans of all political stripes.

In truth, though, the lives of the British royal family have long been of interest to those on ‘this side at the pond.’ From the enthronement of Queen Elizabeth II to the marriage of Prince Charles and Diana, to the weddings of their two boys to the present royal embarrassment, Americans remain fascinated by the British monarchy. Oh, we may espouse democratic and egalitarian ideals, but we are as enamored by the royal family as anyone in Britain. Why is this? Why is it that, as staunchly anti-aristocratic as we are, we find the royals so interesting?

It's not that the individuals themselves are so fascinating. The royal personalities range from the stolidly reserved to the petty and narcissistic. None of them are particularly interesting, not in the sense of doing anything remarkable or saying anything thought-provoking. No, it's royalty itself, I think, the air of kings and queens and castles, the titles, the ceremony, the refined elegance. It all seems so romantic, the stuff of fantasy, like a fairy tale. I suppose this is why Netflix shows like *The Tudors*, about Henry VIII, and *The Crown*, about Queen Elizabeth II, are so popular, and why young girls have for generations reveled in Disney princess movies and why millions of grown-ups tuned in to eight seasons of HBO's adult-themed *Game of Thrones*. There's something alluring about royalty, even mythic. In one episode of *The Crown*, Elizabeth's uncle explains while watching her coronation, “Who wants transparency when you can have magic? Pull away the veil and what are you left with? An ordinary young woman of modest ability and little imagination. But wrap her up like this, anoint her with oil, and hey, presto, what do you have? A goddess.”

But that only explains so much. Hinted at in the glamor of royalty is something more substantial, a quality that speaks to something deeper in us. The British theologian CS Lewis observed, “Even if [democratizers] desire mere equality, they cannot reach it. Where men are forbidden to honour a king, they honour millionaires, athletes, or film-stars instead: even famous prostitutes or gangsters. For spiritual nature, like bodily nature, will be served; deny it food and it will gobble poison.” Lewis wasn't just being a ‘good British subject’ here; he was pointing to something important about human nature. Humans naturally want to worship something. If not a king or queen, then we'll make a lesser idol, like a movie star, athlete, or even a social media influencer, our hero! But to decry the quality of heroes today misses the point, ignores why we have heroes to begin with. You see, we naturally want someone to look up to, to admire, to emulate, someone who embodies the best of us, who gives us a picture of what we could be in our better moments.

A monarch, you see, has long served that role. Kings and queens were held up as ideals, as larger than themselves, thought to be symbols of a people, a nation, offering a dignified authority that is above sullied party wrangling, someone who represents not just a class or faction but the nation as a whole. That's what a monarch is supposed to be, what we hope for in a ruler, the virtues we attribute, invest in them, someone who is regal, stately, who exudes majesty and virtue. Just knowing there is such a noble person is strangely ennobling of our own spirits.

We get a sense of this in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, the books, not the movies—the movie changes things. In the film, the character of Aragorn is a brave man, but in the book he is a magnificent king, so glorious that when he chooses to reveal himself fully, both friend and enemy shrink in his sight. To cite one example, in the film, when Aragorn, Gimli the dwarf, and Legolas the elf are come upon by Eomer and the Riders of Rohan, Aragorn reacts submissively to Eomer's challenge. But in the book, Aragorn does no such thing. Rather, he reveals his true identity with quite the opposite effect.

Aragorn threw back his cloak. The elven sheath glittered as he grasped it, and the bright blade of [his legendary sword] shone like a sudden flame as he swept it out.... "I am Aragorn, son of Arathorn, ...the heir of Isildur Elendil's son of Gondor.... Will you aid me or thwart me? Choose swiftly!"

Gimli and Legolas looked at their companion in amazement, for they had not seen him in this mood before. He seemed to have grown in stature while Eomer shrunk; and in his living face they caught a brief vision of the power and majesty of kings of stone. For a moment it seemed to the eyes of Legolas that a white flame flickered on the brow of Aragorn like a shining crown.

Eomer stepped back and a look of awe was in his face. He cast down his proud eyes. "These are indeed strange days," he muttered. "Dreams and legends spring to life out of the grass."

Here is revealed a true king. Not just an ordinary man, but something of legend, like King Arthur, who suddenly appears out of a mythic past. Indeed, the entire drive of the third book, *The Return of the King*, depends on this vision of a great king. The climax of the book is the coronation of Aragorn. In the film, Aragorn takes up his kingship with all the sheepishness of a man who really believes kings should be done away with and replaced by elected officials. In the book, things are much different as the crown is placed on his head.

But when Aragorn arose all that beheld him gazed in silence, for it seemed to them that he was revealed to them now for the first time. Tall as the sea-kings of old, he stood above all that were near; ancient of days he seemed and yet in the flower of manhood; and wisdom sat upon his brow, and strength and healing were in his hand, and light was about him.

Quite a description, isn't it? Makes you want to see the sight for yourself. To be in his presence. Even in our democratic age, where we are all too easily given to envy, to tearing down those we feel have gotten "too big for their britches," even in this context, this picture of Aragorn as the

magnificent king stands out, stirring in us a longing to be governed by someone of extraordinary goodness, courage, and wisdom, and not the petty tyrants with which we so often beset.

Something like this is how King David is seen in the Old Testament. While he was not as physically impressive as Aragorn—a ruddy runt of a shepherd when Samuel found him and anointed him—David nevertheless represented the best of his people. As the Bible portrays him, David was loyal, courageous, merciful yet commanding, a man of integrity, a warrior with the soul of a poet. But the greatest compliment he was given is that he was a “man after God’s own heart.” Which is why we suspect God not only chose David as king but made a covenant with him and with his descendants. As we read in our first lesson, in response to David’s sincere desire to build a house for God, God promises to establish a house *for David*, the House of David, a dynasty that will rule over Israel forever. And God will watch over his descendants, be to them like a father.

What is overlooked in this amazing promise, though, is that implicit in the privilege of being king is the expectation that David and his descendants will live up to that calling. The Kings of Israel are not given power for their own benefit, to exploit their people or live off their hard work. Rather, their power and authority are given to serve a higher purpose. As our psalms this morning say, the king’s majesty is found precisely in his virtue, in his ability to execute justice, to “rule righteously,” to “defend the needy and rescue the poor and crush the oppressor.” Whereas the rulers among Israel’s enemies were absolute monarchs, lording their power over their subjects, claiming to be subject to no one, Israel’s kings were accountable to a higher principle, to a higher authority, to God. This is what made the kings of Israel so different—not only were they held up as embodiments of power and authority, they were charged with using that power to serve the good of the people, by executing justice and protecting the weak.

When a king failed to live up to this calling, when they “committed iniquity,” as our reading has it, God assures us it will result in discipline. David experienced this in his own life. As admirable as David was as king, he was far from perfect or sinless. Late in his reign, he had an affair with Bathsheba, a married woman, and to make matters worse, he arranged to have her husband killed to cover it up. When confronted about his sin, David repented, but the harm was done. As judgment, David and Bathsheba’s son died, David’s other son Absalom rebelled and was killed, and his kingdom split in two when his grandson came to the throne.

And yet even in this, God kept his promise, remembered his covenant to David, and the House of David stood for nearly 500 years, until the king and with him the kingdom of Judah was so corrupted by injustice and idolatry, that God allowed the Babylonians to conquer them.

That was the end of the Davidic dynasty, but it was not the end of God’s promise even then. Another, very different king, a descendent of David, was born a thousand years after him in Bethlehem, the city of David. This is Jesus, of the House of David on both Mary and Joseph’s sides. Upon his resurrection and ascension, Jesus took up the throne, not in Jerusalem, but in heaven, and his reign endures forever.

That Jesus was the point all along, the intention from the beginning, helps us to make sense of God’s promise of the “eternal rule” of David’s descendants. It was Jesus God had in mind when

he made a covenant with David. It had a literal meaning, in the endurance of the Davidic dynasty, but it had a larger, theological meaning that was realized in the reign of Jesus, the King of kings.

But seeing Jesus as the true King, the epitome of monarchy, the ideal of kingly rule by which all other kings are judged, also helps us to understand why all rulers, no matter how virtuous, regardless of whether they are kings or elected officials, fall short of our expectations, why despite our longing for a good, courageous, wise ruler, earthly authorities always disappoint us. They can't help it. They just can't bear the weight of our hopes and expectations. And they were never meant to. Only Jesus, the just and glorious ruler, can be the true King for us. Only he can live up to the ideal of kingship, for Jesus was the model for it originally, even if we didn't realize it. Our longings for a king who is genuinely good, merciful and just, courageous and powerful find their home in Jesus. He alone satisfies our desire.

Indeed, as we come to the end of our series on the Covenants, we can see how the promises God made to Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses and David all find a deeper meaning, their true significance, in Jesus. In Jesus, the promise to Adam and Eve, that the that their son will crush the serpent's head after being wounded, is realized in Jesus' triumph over Satan. In Jesus, we see how God's promise to Noah to redeem creation without destroying it is worked out, and how from Abraham's loins will come a great nation who will be a light to other nations, as Israel and then the Church are given to be. In Jesus, we see how the freedom promised in Moses' commandments is realized when God's laws are written not simply on tablets of stone but on our hearts, as we are led not by laws but by the Spirit. And now we see how in Jesus our desire for the true King, the embodiment of justice and mercy, glory and power, is fully realized.

Jesus was the intention all along, the ultimate goal of God's covenants with Israel. And as we come to Holy Week next Sunday, we will see how even these promises are transcended, as we witness the reaches Jesus will go to make good on God's promise that "They will be my people and I will be their God," how that commitment reaches even unto death, death on a cross. Thanks be to God.