

“David”:
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)
for December 2nd 2018 (First Sunday of Advent)
by Foster Freed

Jeremiah 33: 14-16

I have long been struck...long been struck by the role David—**King** David—the role David plays in both Jewish and Christian imagination. On one level, of course, none of that ought to surprise. From a Jewish perspective, David is the great Judean King, which is to say the great Jewish King: the founder of the Judean line of Kings, a line formed in the aftermath of the failure of Saul, the tragic King from the tribe not of Judah but of Benjamin. Viewed in that way, Jewish affection for David comes as no surprise including the wearing—by Jews worldwide—of a star they know as “the star of David”. Nor, for that matter, should the central role David plays in Christian imagination entirely surprise us. As this morning’s reading from Jeremiah makes clear, the expected One, the one-who-is-to-come...

...in short, the Anointed One, the Messiah, whose coming is anticipated by Jews and whose **return** is awaited by Christians, especially during the season of Advent....

...as Jeremiah makes clear, the One for whom we wait will come as Righteous Branch of David. A **royal** figure...a figure who traces his lineage to Israel’s royal family...

...worth noting, incidentally, that while the New Testament genealogies provided by Matthew and Luke differ in numerous ways, one of the signal things they share in common is that they both trace the Lord Jesus...

...**King** Jesus, if you please...

...right back to David...King David. And so yes, for Christians as for Jews, David looms large: especially during this time of year. This Advent season when we find ourselves awaiting the return of David’s heir, even as we recall his first coming over 2000 years ago. The King. The Anointed. The righteous branch of David. The One we call Jesus.

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Well. As I said at the outset, I have long been struck by the role David plays...partly because David is so magnificently **flawed** a figure, and a figure who is appropriately regarded—first and foremost—in the context of his people’s **political** achievements. First coming to prominence as the shepherd-boy who manages to slay the giant Goliath, then as a member of the court of King Saul, then as an outlaw-fugitive waging guerilla-warfare against Saul, eventually replacing Saul as King: there can be no

doubting David's brilliance as a consolidator of power...and as an at times ruthless manipulator of the power he manages to consolidate. Nor is there any attempt to hide David's considerable blemishes: culminating with the despicable act through which he steals another man's wife...

...Uriah the Hittite, a foreigner **loyally** serving in David's armed forces...

...stealing Uriah's wife and then, when it becomes obvious that David will not be able to cover-up the crime, arranging to have Uriah murdered in battle. It's ugly...certainly uglier (at least by our contemporary way of weighing such things) than anything committed by David's predecessor Saul. And you know: it's not just when juxtaposed with Saul that some of David's prominence might begin to strike us as odd: on the contrary, if we wanted to search for the Old Testament King who truly exuded a sense of holiness and righteousness, we would bypass David in a heartbeat and head straight for his distant descendant Josiah. Nor is it irrelevant that David is cut from so very different a cloth than the true "spiritual" innovators of the Old Testament: Abraham, Moses, the prophets! And yet David, as consistently if not more consistently than any of the rest, continually finds favour with God: a God who—to be fair—**does** strenuously punish David when he does wrong, but who enters into a covenant with David that amounts, in effect, to an eternal assurance that God will not abandon David's line. Err though he and his descendants might...betray their kingly office though he and his descendants might...the covenant made by God with David...

...a covenant so unlike the covenant with Moses...

...is essentially God's way of promising ongoing blessing, ongoing affection, unswerving faithfulness to David, rather than a covenant through which David is asked to express unswerving faithfulness to God! What gives? What's the deal? What's the deal with David?

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Suffice it to say...suffice it to say that David, despite the many things he may well have gotten wrong, managed to get one thing right. And perhaps...perhaps at the end of the day...the one thing he gets right justifies the pride of place he has managed to hold for faithful people for over 3000 years. And a clue...perhaps the key clue...to the one thing David gets right, is found in the fact that David's place in the court of King Saul is cemented not only by his having slain the giant, but by his musical gifts: gifts with which he soothes the fevered unhappiness of the King. David is a musician...and David is a poet. Indeed! Just as David's son Solomon is the figure who looms over all of the **wisdom** literature produced by ancient Israel, David is the figure who personifies his people's **poetic** response to God: a poetic response captured most fully in the 150 psalms collected in the book that bears that name.

Scripture does not attribute all of the psalms to David, but scripture **does** regard him as the author of some of the psalms, and—in effect—the spiritual midwife even of

those psalms they attribute to others. Worth noting in that regard...worth noting is that the psalms, when read in Church, are the one type of reading to which the church has **not** traditionally responded by saying: "The Word of the Lord". On the contrary: the traditional Christian response to the reading of a psalm, is the saying of the Gloria Patri:

*Glory be to the Father and to the Son
and to the Holy Spirit;
As it was in the beginning, is now
and ever shall be:
World without end, Amen.*

And the reason...the reason that is a far more fitting response to a psalm, is because the psalms are, by and large, not examples of God's speech to us...

...rather they are to be regarded as cries from the human heart: professing faith, confessing sin, marvelling at creation's wonders, expressing gratitude for the Lord's powerful shepherding love and yes—on occasion...on occasion—expressing anguished bewilderment when it appears that God has abandoned us. You see...David, rightly regarded, ought to be thought of as poet no less than as King. And both as King (the representative royal figure) and as poet (giving expression to humanity's joy and anguish, humanity's surprising triumphs and horrendous failures)...

...both as King and as poet, David stands in that place...stands in that place where the cry of the human heart ascends to the God who is listening...who is watching and waiting for us even as we watch and wait for Him...

And here's the thing.

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Advent is the season...the season when we watch and wait with heightened attentiveness for the coming of the One for whom we ought **always** to be watching, for whom we always ought to be waiting. And we need not pretend...we need not make-believe—that we know nothing about this One for whom we watch and wait. At a bare minimum, we know that the Christ whom we await came to us and will again come to us as fully human (the man for us!) and yet somehow fully divine (God for us). Fully human this Jesus...embodying the heart-cry of his ancestor David and thereby embodying the heart-cry of all people in all times and places. And yet fully divine...embodying the covenant faithfulness (the outlandish, amazing grace) of the God who chides and rebukes (you can count on it)...and yet the God whose love is a stubborn love: the very love shown to that most imperfect of Kings: the poet-King who gave voice to our **brokenness**...

Have mercy on me, O God...(that's the 51st Psalm)

...the poet-King who gave voice to our **gratitude**...

*I will give thanks to you, O God among the peoples,
I will sing praises to you among the nations... (that's the 57th Psalm)*

...the poet-King who named our most persistent **fears**...

*...my God, my God, why have you forsaken me;
Why are you so far from saving me,
from the words of my groaning... (the 22nd Psalm,
the psalm Jesus cries out from the Cross)*

...above all the poet-King, the debased sinner, who knew better than most the faithfulness of God's unwavering love, a love which, over and over again, is proven trustworthy even in the midst of our rank untrustworthiness:

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want...
(as you all well know, that is the best known of the psalms, the 23rd)

And with that...with the 23rd Psalm's stern and joyful and confident affirmation of trust—trust in God—David reminds us of what it means to watch and to wait as an Advent people: as a people who most certainly do **watch** because they have yet fully to see...

...who most certainly do **wait** because they are eager for the dawn...

...and yet a people entitled to wait neither anxiously nor fearfully: but trustingly. Not any old trust: but the trust that comes from knowing the One for whom we wait. The trust that comes from knowing the faithfulness—the power and the love—of the One who is to come, the One who has promised to return.

Friends in Christ. On this First Advent Sunday, may we be blessed in the waiting and in the watching. May we be blessed with both the challenges and the joys of this sacred season.

Thanks be to God!