

## ***“Good Will or God’s Will?”***

2 Samuel 7:1-18, 27-29 (NRSV)

By and large, from David’s perspective, things are pretty peachy right now. He’s the new king of Israel; he’s defeated the biggest enemy of the day – the Philistines; Jerusalem is *his* city now (aka: The City of David); he has a great new cedar palace with lots of wives, concubines, and children running around; and God is literally with him since he had successfully gotten the ark to Jerusalem. (Remember, back then, they believed that the presence of God literally resided in the ark of the covenant.)

As a new king, David has been going non-stop – like the energizer bunny –and it seems that he finally has a quiet moment to kick up his feet a bit and relax. When this happens – when we actually stop and catch our breath – sometimes we get really good ideas!

Our text today says David is “settled” into his house, so who knows, perhaps he’s having a drink by the pool, literally kicking his feet up and taking a breather. And all the sudden, seemingly out of the blue, he gets the best idea ever! He starts thinking about how

much God has done for him and the fact that God is essentially living in a tent, while he is living in this mansion palace of a house. And he says to himself, *“Hey, I’m the King, right? I can do anything! I’m going to build God a really nice house – God deserves it!”* (v1-2).

Now David’s so excited about his epiphany that he blurts it out to Nathan. This is the first time we hear about Nathan, and the writer tells us he’s a prophet, which means his job is to keep the king in check. To remind the king of God’s desires, God’s promises, God’s commandments...to not let ego cloud good judgement or God’s will.

But like kings, prophets are human, and they don’t always get it right. So while we don’t know a lot about Nathan it seems like he’s kind of a “yes man,” at least in this moment. Because he jumps on King David’s idea immediately. *“Yes, a house for God! Great idea! Go ahead and get started...”* (v3). Whether or not David was seeking Nathan’s endorsement or not, he got it, and it was a green light.

*“The Lord is with you,”* Nathan says.

The bandwagon has officially been jumped upon! Both David and Nathan think building God a house is a great idea. How could building God a sanctuary *not* be a good thing?

Well, like many of our best laid plans, God had a different idea. And that night the Lord came to Nathan in a dream and rains on their parade, raising this simple question for David: *“Are you the one to build me a house to live in? I haven’t ever lived in a house...from the day I brought your people out from Egypt until today, I’ve been just fine in a tent and a tabernacle. And in all those years did I ever say to anyone, ‘Why have you not built me a house of cedar?”* (v5-7).

Well, rats, God! Why do you have to be a party pooper? God sucks the air out of their party, and out of their egos. And that’s because God has even better “party” planned, but they didn’t know it. Pastor Eugene Peterson explains: *“There are times when our grand human plans to do something for God are seen, after a night of prayer, to be a huge human distraction from*

*what God is doing for us. That’s what Nathan realized that night: God showed Nathan that David’s building plans for God would interfere with God’s building plans for David.”*<sup>1</sup>

You see David got excited about something that he saw a vision for, without stopping to consider whether it was part of God’s vision at all. Before we expound on that, I want to point out several key things in this passage.

First, in verses 1, 2, and 3 David is referred to as the *king*, but when God refers to David, God calls him *My servant* (verse 5). It seems that David is a little too conscious of his position as king. Now in relation to all the people inside and outside of Israel, David is the highest authority in the land. But in relation to *God*, David is a servant. But David almost appears to be wanting to give God a helping hand. And so God kind of puts David in his place, by referring to David as a servant, and by saying, *“Who are you to be building Me a house?”*<sup>2</sup> I say it a lot from this pulpit, but it always seems relevant: God is God and we are not! (The people in the Bible clearly struggled with this just as much as we do!)

<sup>1</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, *Leap Over A Wall: Earthly Spirituality for Everyday Christians*, p. 160.

<sup>2</sup> Bob Deffinbaugh, “Building God’s House (2 Samuel 7:1-29),” *Bible.org* (June 1, 2004), accessed on July 22, 2018 at

[https://bible.org/seriespage/7-building-god-s-house-2-samuel-7-1-29#P594\\_239197](https://bible.org/seriespage/7-building-god-s-house-2-samuel-7-1-29#P594_239197).

Second, in verses 6-11a, God explains to David why building a temple is not necessary. The first reason is given in verse 6 and can be summed up this way: “*If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.*” (Why buy a new car if your present car performs perfectly, right?)

Throughout Israel's history, from Mt. Sinai to the reign of David, the tabernacle had protected the ark and had gotten the job done! God was with the people as the ark was kept in the tabernacle. And when the people moved from one place to another, the tabernacle and the ark went with them. God was with the people wherever they went. God gave them victory over their enemies and possession of the promised land. Israel's history bore testimony to the fact that there was nothing to fix; the tabernacle as God's house was working just fine!<sup>3</sup>

Third, in verse 7, God gives yet another reason for there being no real need for a temple: “*I didn’t ask for one.*” The instructions that God gave Moses on Mt. Sinai about the construction of the tabernacle were so detailed (*meticulously detailed*) that you’d think if the plans had changed and God had a new idea that surely God would have let them know!<sup>4</sup>

Fourth, in verses 8-11a, God gets to the heart of the matter. Did you hear how often the pronoun “I” is in this passage? This section is very clearly God-centered. As Eugene Peterson points out: “*The message that Nathan delivers to David is dominated by a recital of what God has done, is doing, and will do. God is the first-person subject of twenty-three verbs in this message, and these verbs carry the action. David, full of what he’s going to do for God, is now subjected to a comprehensive rehearsal of what God has done, is doing, and will do for David. What looked yesterday like a bold Davidic enterprise on behalf of God now looks [well, kind of ridiculous!]*”<sup>5</sup>

God rehearses David's history and reminds David *Who* is taking care of *Whom*. Again – God is God and we are not.

Fifth, in verse 10, the verbs change from past-oriented to future-oriented. After pointing out all that God has done for David and Israel in the past, God says: “*David, My servant, you haven’t seen anything yet. The best is yet to come!*” God promises to appoint a place for the people where they will dwell in peace because the wicked will no

<sup>3</sup> Deffinbaugh, *ibid.*  
<sup>4</sup> Deffinbaugh, *ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Peterson, p. 161.

longer afflict them. It won't be like it used to be, from the time of the judges till the present. God will give David rest from all his enemies.<sup>6</sup>

The promise is solidified when God says, “*David will not build me a house; but I will build a house for David.*” Now there’s a bit of a wordplay going on here. The word for “house” in Hebrew (*bayith*) can mean “a place where someone dwells” OR it can also mean “a dynasty.” So while David is talking about building God a physical house, God is using a play on words to say, “*I am going to build you, David, not just a house – but a dynasty, of which there will be no end.*” This is a significant promise that God is making to David. It’s called the “Davidic Covenant.” God promises to raise up David’s offspring and they will rule after him forever.<sup>7</sup>

After this promise we know that David’s line lasts for many years. But it is certainly not forever. Eventually, Israel is taken into exile in Babylon and David’s line of kings ends. But while it seemed for a while that God had broken the promise, really, God just had a non-conventional idea. And that idea (Christian’s believe) would be

Jesus. Jesus, of the house of David, became the leader that God had promised. And as such, David’s line does get to be king forever.<sup>8</sup> Because Jesus comes to earth to show us the kingdom of God or the *kin-dom* of God: how we are to live together, love each other, and spread the good news of God’s love.

But that’s all in the future, let’s get back to today’s text. After learning of Nathan’s vision and promise, David actually listens! David realizes that God is right, and gives God glory and praise. David does a complete 180 in his idea about building God a house. He realizes how his desire was not, in fact, God’s desire.

To summarize this whole exchange, it’s not that David’s inherent idea is bad (God will actually have a temple built by Solomon) OR that his intentions are in the wrong place (he wanted to do something good for God), it’s just that his desire to build a house for God didn’t align at all with God’s plan for the future. And even more, God had a much *greater* plan in mind for David than David could even imagine. Sure, David thought building a house for God would help make

<sup>6</sup> Deffinbaugh, *ibid*.

<sup>7</sup> Nikki Hardeman, “God will not be contained,” *Faith Element: Setting the Bible Free* (July 22, 2012), accessed on July 22, 2018 at

<http://www.faithelement.com/sessions/2012/7/17/god-will-not-be-contained.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Hardeman, *ibid*.

him great as king, but God says,  
“*You’ve got it all wrong, I’m going to make you and your family great – but it will be on my terms, and it will be through lineage, not through a literal house.*”

This passage is another great example of how human David is...and I think probably most of us can relate to David’s excitement about a great idea that turned out to be not the right direction to go.

Have you had this experience? Where you thought something was “so right” for your life or for your family, and in reality, you were “so wrong?” It doesn’t always become clear so quickly. (Rarely is it overnight like in David’s case!) Figuring out the way God is leading us is not easy, and there is no formula I can give you to figure out how to know whether you are operating out of your own goodwill or whether you are actually following God’s will *or* whether those two things are one in the same. (Often times they are, I think.)

Here’s the thing, we can lose a lot of sleep and make ourselves crazy if we are always praying for God’s will to be revealed in our lives before we ever make a move. We can pray and pray and pray, but I think, God’s will is more likely to be revealed in how we respond to

whatever happens *after* we make a decision.

I’ll give you an example from my own life. My senior year in college, I had decided that divinity school was the right “next” step for me. I looked into six seminaries or divinity schools in depth, and I ended up applying to three. I told myself that whichever school gave me the best financial scholarship – well, that would clearly be the school that God wanted me to go to. Two of the schools had scholarship opportunities, one better than the other. The third school was really clear with me that they had no scholarship opportunities (but that school was kind of long shot application for me anyway).

I interviewed at the first school, and through that process was offered a full-ride scholarship. So I pretty much thought, “*This is great - God is speaking loud and clear on this one!*” But a few weeks later, to my surprise, I found out I also received a full ride scholarship to the second school. Now I had a decision on my hands. As I was agonizing over which of those two schools to attend, I received a letter from my “long-shot no scholarship school” that said a) not only did I get in to the school b) I also received a full ride scholarship!

I remember getting that letter and running across campus to my professor's office and saying, "*This is impossible, they don't even give scholarships.*" He said he had never heard of this school giving scholarships either, so we called the school's admission office, and lo and behold, there was a new president of the university and he had decided to start something called the "Presidential Scholarship" and each of the smaller schools – the Education School, the Design School, the Divinity School (essentially any school that wasn't Law, Medicine, or Political Science) was able to award one full ride scholarship to an incoming student of that school's choice. It was a brand new program, and to this day I don't know why, but the divinity school chose me.

Now – while this seems like a dream come true – full ride scholarships to all three schools I applied to (and definitely a "first world" problem) – I was frustrated. My plan to figure out which school to attend was thwarted! And this was divinity school after all...and I was going to be a minister! Don't I have to be absolutely certain of God's will in this situation? If I mess this up, who knows how messed up my

ministry will be? How was I gonna decide this if all three schools gave me the same financial scholarship? What is that quote? "*If you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans?*"

Well, I felt like God was laughing for sure. I felt pressure to make a decision fast to make "the right" decision. I remember being in my pastor's office, going back and forth about the benefits of each school and the potential challenges and how a degree from one school might affect my employment in a Baptist church down the road, etc. If I'm honest, I probably just wanted him to tell me which school to go to. But he said, instead, "*Anne, you are trying so hard to figure out which school God wants you to attend? Has it occurred to you, that it really doesn't matter which one you attend because whatever school you attend – God will be there with you? There's not a wrong choice here – just pick the one you feel is best and God will be with you.*"

That moment was one of those huge "lightbulb" moments for me that has helped me in far more difficult decisions than what divinity school to attend. To know that no matter my choice or decision, God will be with me, is really quite freeing.

This doesn't mean you don't pray about something and talk to trusted friends and mentors to get their advice, but it does mean that at the end of the day, worrying about whether or not something is God's will and waiting for a clear sign that it is God's will – may not be the best course to take. Sometimes, you just have to start down a road, and pay attention to how doors are opening or how road blocks are popping up and use *that* as a guide for discerning God's will.

If you think about it, this is what happened to David. He had a great idea that he thought for sure was God's will, but then when God spoke to Nathan in the dream, David listened and course-corrected and realized that his goodwill wasn't God's will after all. God didn't just let David go along and proceed with his grand idea, God redirected David. Now if David had ignored Nathan's dream, would he have gone ahead and built the temple? We don't know...maybe. Or maybe something else would have happened to help David rethink his idea.

The point is, David listened to the wisdom of his friend and prophet; he didn't ignore that. And I think that too is a big part of figuring out what is just *our* goodwill of an idea and what is actually *God's*

will. Jesus didn't work in isolation, and neither did the Apostle Paul. Listening to what others are saying is another helpful way to discern if you are on the right path...because sometimes we just need to get out of our own heads and realize there's a bigger picture.

Frederick Buechner defines vocation as "*the place where your deep gladness meets the world's deep need.*" But this definition can work for a lot of decisions I think...not just our vocation. I believe God's will is for us to do something that inherently fulfills our lives and uses our gifts. But the way to check our desires (to make sure we are not just serving ourselves) is to ask, "*what need is this meeting in the world?*" David's idea had one half of the equation – it brought him great joy, but it didn't meet a *real* need.

If you are trying to discern whether or not something is just your good idea, or whether it is actually something that God is on board with, perhaps ask yourself – who does this serve besides myself? In this decision, am I paying attention to the needs of those around me, or am I just paying attention to what feels good to me?

In her book, *Lucky Boy*, author Shanthi Sekaran wrote, “*And good intentions? These scared him the most: people with good intentions tended not to question themselves. And people who didn't question themselves were the ones to watch out for.*”

Similarly, journalist Isabel Paterson once said: “*Most of the harm in the world is done by good people, and not by accident, lapse, or omission. It is the result of their deliberate actions, long persevered in, which they hold to be motivated by high ideals toward virtuous ends.*”

These are sobering quotes. They caution all of us about our own good intentions and goodwill...no matter what we think is good, it may not indeed be of God. To check our own ideas of goodwill, we have to ask ourselves, is our decision or action helping us to “*do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God?*” (Micah 6:8).

Is our decision or action leading down a path of looking out for those who are vulnerable or oppressed or forgotten or silenced or marginalized? Because that's who Jesus hung out with and cared for...and we believe that Jesus came to show us the inside of God's mind and heart, if you

will...what God cares about, what God would do, what God would say. Jesus gives us a clear picture of God's will because Jesus gives us a clear picture of God's heart.

Remember the popular WWJD bracelets? “*What would Jesus do?*” It's corny and cliché but, honestly, it's a more concrete way of discerning God's will than anything else – because we have Jesus' life to look at. And maybe you'll take comfort to know that even Jesus himself struggled with what to do sometimes. As he is praying in the Garden of Gethsemane before his death he says, “*Lord, if you are willing, take this cup from me. But not my will, but your will be done,*” (Luke 22:42).

This is a lifetime struggle. But through any discernment, this is always true: God is with you. So the fact that *God will* be with you no matter what decision you make is perhaps the key to discerning *God's will*. Could it be that simple?

Could it be that discerning “**God's will**” is merely trusting that **God will** be with you...no matter what?

If so, that is good news!

Amen.