

“When God Doesn’t Need Your Help”

2 Samuel 7:1-14

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David wants to build a house for God, but God doesn’t want David’s help. It’s not that God thinks a house is a bad idea. God says, yeah, I’ll take a house later. I just want your son to build it, not you.

Recognizing this inconsistency, some scholars have argued that this part about David’s son building the house is a later addition to this text by some scribe representing the pro-temple community. God is clear in the earlier part of the text - I don’t do houses. I move among the people. I don’t want to be tied down to any plot of land. Don’t cramp my style. God is clear in the earlier part of the text. So the reversal must be historical, not a true reflection of God’s resistance to settling down.

But I’m not convinced. I’ve come to accept the one thing you can count on about the God revealed to us in our Holy Book is her refusal to be pinned down - to a location - yes. But also God’s refusal to submit to our notions of consistency. Her willingness to act one way at one time and another way in another time. Her ability to change her mind. Her decision, always, to remain free.

Which is one of the toughest parts of my job as a pastor. You might think that the worst part of my job is being a kind of official spokesperson for the church - the stupid stuff that some Christians say, the hurtful stuff that some Christians do. But you’d be wrong. The worst part is trying to keep up with an unpredictable God who doesn’t always want the help that we want to give him. Who refuses to submit to our most solid theologies, our most rational explanations. Which means that any pastor, any theologian, any believer who is in the business of trying to demystify this God for someone else is likely to be embarrassed.

Look at the prophet Nathan in this story. No one has a better resume of spiritual experience than Nathan. He’s anointed kings, already spoken truth to power and is destined to do it again; he’s studied the ways of God in the world; and yet!; the one time he tries to speak for God in this story he is immediately overruled by God.

King David says to Nathan – look, I just renovated my kitchen and added a new addition to my crib and now I’m feeling really guilty that I’m living in luxury while God is living in a tent. Nathan, using common sense that comes with pastoral experience responds, “Thank you for blessing our community with a portion of the gifts that God has entrusted to you. Go do it and let’s end this special time together with me blessing your good decision to share your resources with God and God’s people.” And then God says to Nathan: “Nope. Go tell David the opposite of what you just told him.”

When I first saw that I went back to see if I could find where Nathan had made the mistake. How could he learn from this error to see why God wouldn't want to build a temple in the first place? Where did he miss the signs, how was his discernment mistaken, where did he go wrong?

But the truth is that God's announcement here is very unpredictable and not just about house or no house. God's word here about David and his descendants is almost a complete reversal of everything that God has said up to this point in the Hebrew Bible. Up until this point in the story of God's chosen people, nearly everything with God has been conditional. "If you do this," God says "then I will do that." "If you love me with your whole heart, then I will bless you." "If you shun idols, then I will not depart from you." "If you keep my commandments, then my steadfast love will remain with you." It's not a far leap into the conditional promise, "If you build me a house, I will bless you even more than you are already blessed." It's no wonder that David and Nathan - the prophet appointed by God - both expect God to bless this new construction.

But instead God decides "you're not going to make me a house, I'm going to make you a house - a metaphorical one to match the mansion you've just built. I'm going to love you and your house - your dynasty - forever regardless of all the mess that I know I'm going to have to clean up from you and your descendants since you are human like all the rest. Yes I'll whip their butts a few times but I'm going to love you all forever." Neither David nor Nathan would have any reason to see *that* kind of promise coming.

The whole of the Hebrew faith up until this point in the story has been conditional. The story of "if, then."¹ Now God decides unilaterally and without precedent to say something completely different. There is no way for Nathan or any other prophet to predict this kind of a reversal.

Which both scares me to death and thrills me to no end. It scares me because there's no precedent for "I want you, prophet, to say something different." There's no precedent for hearing God say, "I've decided to go in a new direction." There's nothing you can study, or learn or memorize for hearing God say "I want you to tell the people this instead of that." And that unpredictability makes anything like ethics or spirituality or justice based solely on rules or reason nearly impossible. When is God telling you to stay the course and when is God telling you to pick up and make a big change? When is God telling you to love your neighbors by listening to them and when is God telling you to resist and protest and fight back against their hate and fear? When is God telling you to be smarter about saving your money and when is God telling you to divest yourself of more of it? Trying to discern God's dreams for your life, not to mention our church or our city is one of the most frightening parts of faith because we can rarely say, "this rule always applies in this situation or that." We can rarely say, "God always

¹ "The whole of Mosaic faith, sounded by Joshua and Samuel as well, is that God's good inclination depends on Israel's obedience" - Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, Interpretation Bible Commentary, (Louisville: John Knox Press), 1990, p. 257.

expects us to do X, Y, or Z. We cannot substitute rules about God for a relationship with him. It's frightening.

But it's also thrilling because, if you are open to the dynamism of this God, then you can get a front row seat to witness God's decisive, serendipitous activity. You can watch God surprise even the most confident of prophets. You can watch God raising up a new Moses to lead the people a little closer to the promised land. You can watch God comfort a friend in the ashes of an ending where you saw for yourself that there was no possibility for new life. You can pay attention to the miraculous ways our bodies have been built to heal themselves, the details on the tiniest of flowers, and the ocean's expanse putting us into the humble places where we belong. You can watch God take out a President who's not doing his job and raise up children to help us see the cost of violence against the earth or each other. You can observe God raising up people we discounted but God recruited to bring us toward the heavenly city we have yet to fully see.

And while it's often embarrassing as a pastor to admit that you have no idea how someone who was addicted to a substance for a couple of decades found God and healing suddenly, or how reconciliation between a mother and a child happened when no one predicted it, or how a community prayed for one leader to lead them out of poverty and crime and drugs and into a new future and it suddenly happened - I'll take all that embarrassment - for the relief that it brings. Because most of the time we're all trying to manufacture hope on our own. I know I am. Trying to reach deep to inspire a people, or heal myself of my hurts, or organize people for change as if most of it depended on me. Trying to find love or grace or healing or justice when if we slowed down enough we'd see that love and grace and healing and justice has been trying to find us all along.

God's big no to David and Nathan is a clear reminder to you and me that God doesn't always need our help. God is bringing love out of fear, hope out of despair, leaders out of chaos, cities out of ruins in times and ways beyond our understanding, beyond our managing, beyond our efforts.

Which is actually the best part of being a pastor - a kind of semi-official spokesperson for God at a time when so many people have been hurt by the stupid stuff that some Christians say, the hurtful stuff that some Christians do. I don't have to support, or even explain away all of that hurt as if any of it was ever justified. And I don't have to play into the rigid, staid reputation that some who call themselves people of faith have built for me and for the disruptive God we worship. I just have to notice where love is coming into the world, notice where justice is organizing people to stand for it, notice where grace is finding its way even into the most hardened of hearts and get with it.

I experienced this for the upteenth time again last Saturday night, minding my own business outside at a brewery listening to an all female Bluegrass Band sweeten

up the night air with their harmonies. My vacation bliss was blasted by a new acquaintance who dropped the dreaded question on me - what do you do for a living? I've learned through the years that roughly a third of people who find out this new information don't treat you any differently. Another third assumes you'll be sympathetic to their complaints that the absence of prayer in schools is more important than the planet on fire, or how just that morning prayer had landed them a parking spot at the Wal-Mart or healed them of their hemorrhoids which they want to brief you on in detail. And another third think you're an ignorant, judgmental jerk. My new acquaintance was in the last category. A few beers in his belly didn't help. "Oh, you're one of those *Christians*," he sneered. "Holier than thou, here to judge me." "Look, man." I told him, trying to focus on the band. "I'm off the clock right now, alright?" But he was just warming up. "I don't believe in some God who tells you what to think and not to have fun." "Oh, really," I said, "So what do you do for a living?" "Active duty military," he said. "Oh ho!" I laughed. "So *you're gonna lecture me* about working for an organization that tells me what to do and what to believe? Give me a freaking break, man."

Taken aback, he tried to recover, going onto explain the details about his job holding different parts of the military accountable. "I don't work for the bad acting part of the military. I'm more like a socialist on the inside." But I wasn't backing down. "So you don't work for the bad acting part of the military?" I said. "Well, I don't work for the bad acting part of the church. I don't tell people what to believe. I don't lecture people on how to behave. And I don't assume that because somebody works in the military or somebody works in the church, they're automatically a jerk just because their institution has done some terrible things. In fact, I'm really happy when I do meet someone who's inside of a broken institution trying to do their part to push it in more just and generous directions." With that he bought me a round and we had a real conversation about mystery and life and the death of his alcoholic father and the healing he was still after.

I went on to observe with him how odd and unusual it is when I meet a socialist working for justice and peace and humanity inside the US military. And how heartwarming it is to hear of a son hurt by his father trying to create a different future for his son. I told him I hoped that I wouldn't offend him if I chose to believe that if God wanted something else from him I'm sure she'd find a way whether he chose to believe in God or not.

How do I know that? I don't. I don't know what God wants or needs from my new friend - it's not for me to determine or say. Maybe nothing. Maybe God just wants to bless him with life and love and more energy for the good work that he's already doing. Maybe God will be there for him when something breaks in his heart or his life and he's less sure of himself than he projected on that Saturday night. Or maybe God just wanted to bless me with a couple of free rounds of beer and another front row seat to witness surprising grace - grace that's almost too much for us to handle, the hope that springs up from desolate places, the humanity we encounter when it seems we

might have come to blows, the people that God is working through even when they - even when we - don't even know it! A reminder that God doesn't always need my help or yours to bring about a little more justice, a little more generosity, a little more humanity and peace.