

2 Samuel 7:1-13

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“More Bible Stories: David Tells God *his* Plans”

INTRODUCTION

I remember clearly a lesson I learned at church as a child. I must have been bigger than a toddler, but not very old. It was a strong theological point. I want you to learn it, if you don't know it and remember it if you do- it's important.

God answers every one of your prayers. Yes, every one! Some are answered 'yes'. Some are answered, 'no' and others are answered 'not now'. If you pray and the answer isn't YOUR answer, don't assume God didn't hear or God ignored you. Assume God is suggesting a different way and can use any situation for peace, comfort and hope. “We know that in everything God works for the good” (Romans 8:28).

But today we're speaking about praying for discernment or desires. We do one of two things when we face a challenge. One is to pray and then assume our prayers aren't answered, if the answer is different than what we want. We are smarter than God. (not)

The other is to skip the praying (the asking) and instead just tell God what will happen. That's what David did. He hadn't heard Paul preach: “not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think” (Romans 12:3). David said: I'm going to build God a box to live in!

CONTEXT

You know reading scripture we are supposed to read in context. So, one contextual question is: “Who's Nathan and where did he come from?” This is the first place, page number-wise, where Nathan is mentioned. In the same account almost word for word, in 1 Chronicles 17, he's just there, too.

Basically Nathan the prophet just shows up in these accounts without any introduction other than naming him Nathan the prophet and later described as note taker. Context, here and in other stories he's David's advisor, pastor, counsellor, and stated clerk. Do you have a Nathan or two? The Message paraphrase says it this way:

Then one day King David said to Nathan the prophet, “Look at this: Here I am, comfortable in a luxurious house of cedar, and the Chest of God sits in a plain tent.”

Nathan told the king, “Whatever is on your heart, go and do it. God is with you.”

But that night, the word of God came to Nathan saying, “Go and tell my servant David: This is God's word on the matter: You're going to build a 'house' for me to live in? Why, I haven't lived in a 'house' from the time I brought the children of Israel up from Egypt till now. All that time I've moved about with nothing but a tent. And in all my travels with Israel, did I ever say to any of the leaders I commanded to shepherd Israel, 'Why haven't you built me a house of cedar?' “

That's a lot of context, already. God reminds David and Nathan of their context, “look back: I've been with you. Look forward: I have a plan. And right now? Listen to me!”

You'd have to read a lot of chapters to get all the context of the ark of the covenant and the Ten Commandments and where and how God's people worshipped. We can't do all of that today. The point is, God always works in context!

PREQUEL

For many years the children here have learned this story from *Children in Worship*, entitled "An ark and a tent for God". (Here's the model of the ark of the covenant.) The ark of the covenant and its dimensions are recorded in Exodus 25 (:10-15) along with all the other information about the priestly duties and apparel (like the ephod). With the measurements converted from cubits, the ark of the covenant was 3 ¾ feet long and 2 ¼ feet wide and deep. Inside were the tablets of the Ten Commandments! I probably should have talked about this last week.

The design of this ark (also known as a holy box) shouldn't be confused with Noah's ark which was much larger box, 450 feet long! The ark we are referring to today is the ark of the covenant, the sacred chest, very important in the telling of the story of the Old Testament stories.

The tent (dwelling) that David assumed God was God's residence (Exodus 26) was around 45 feet long, 15 feet wide and tall. It was made of multiple layers of fabric and poles and fastenings. But it was a tent, it was PORTABLE. It was a visible reminder that God was able to go with the people, wherever they went, and especially where God directed them to go. (The Children in Worship story is on display.)

LESSONS

God wanting to be portable in the people's eyes is one of the sermon lessons this text demonstrates. God is with us wherever we go!

But there isn't always a Nathan to help us hear God. Occasionally we want something so much we think God says "go for it". Sometimes we act in confidence that God agrees with our plan, only to have the open door, slammed shut. Prince Charming, despite what the fairy tales say, can turn back into a toad. And in normal life, truth is stranger than fiction.

How can we know what God wants us to do? An old Yiddish proverb "We plan, God laughs", probably is adapted from Proverbs 19:21 (NLT)

"You can make many plans, but the LORD's purpose will prevail".

It's not that God is cruel and laughs at the desires of our hearts. It's just that we have such limited knowing compared to God's wisdom and perspective. And sometimes our human frailty is part of the equation; we want what we just can't have.

I meet with a spiritual director once a month. Being a pastor she's sort of my pastor and teacher. The topic of discernment is part of her professional work, so I asked her about how we can know God's preferred future. She sent me a list adapted from St. Ignatius of Loyola. Saint Ignatius lived around the time of the reformation of the church when the protestants separated from the catholics in the 1500s. Ignatius was a Spanish priest and theologian, who founded the religious order called the Society of Jesus (the Jesuits). The Jesuit order served the Pope as missionaries and still do.

Ignatius is remembered as a gifted spiritual director. He recorded his methods of spiritual discernment- listening for God, in a book called the *Spiritual Exercises*, a

simple set of meditations, prayers, and other mental exercises, first published in 1548. Here's what my spiritual director sent me:

Spiritual Direction: A Discernment Process – *adapted from St. Ignatius*

Seven steps to consider when discerning

1. Enter silence and listen.
2. Hold your options with holy indifference.
3. Seek feedback from your community.
4. Is the option practical?
5. Listen with your gut – intuition – consolation/desolation (feelings)
6. Figuratively walk down the path of each option. What do you see?
7. Make a decision and act.

With additional questions to ask:

- *What is my motivation?
- *My ego is where in the motivation?

Let's backtrack and see how David did, using "Ignatius' steps to consider" when discerning.

1. *Enter silence and listen.*
David did not listen for God, he decided for God.
2. *Hold your options with holy indifference.*
David was all gung-ho with his idea to build a temple, one-sided.
3. *Seek feedback from your community.*
He did tell Nathan and at first Nathan was impressed with the idea.
4. *Is the option practical?*
Maybe it was! David had earthly resources, obviously, if he had a house. But was it necessary? no.
5. *Listen with your gut – intuition – consolation/desolation.*
It seemed like the idea made David happy but it didn't make God happy. That's more important. Things that we want to do may not bring glory to God.
6. *Figuratively walk down the path of each option. What do you see?*
I think David saw honor for himself as the temple builder, not as a humble servant of God.
7. *Make a decision and act.*
David listened to his spiritual advisor and God, and didn't invest in the temple building project. He invested in building his family and the building up of God's people, which lead to his son, really wise king Solomon being the one to built the temple (~832 BCE.)

And those additional questions that help us discern:

**What is my motivation?*

What was David's motivation? Maybe guilt that he had so much success? Maybe the tent was looking a bit shabby or what? That's a fun reflection. And also:

**My ego is where in the motivation?*

It definitely was about David's ego, right? David wanted to feel effective and important.

We so much prefer feeling effective and important. If we can be the hero, it helps counter all the times when we are more Joe Average, just typical, no big deal.

(Interestingly there is a Canadian artist whose name really is Joe Average!)

Too often we want to project an image, usually a false image, of confidence. And Jesus warned: "Be especially careful when you are trying to be good so that you don't make a performance out of it. It might be good theater, but the God who made you won't be applauding" (Matthew 6:1 the Message)-- at least that's how Eugene Peterson explained it in the Message.

Have you ever had an experience when you really thought God was directing something lovely and then it didn't work out? In hindsight it's easy to question why things happen. It can be really painful. Sometimes later, it's possible to see the way God does it, is better and intended for God's purposes.

Back when I was working as a chaplain I thought I'd found the best professional answer: a full-time chaplain position at Borgess- Kalamazoo. Thanks God! I had been working 3 different part-time positions and it was hectic; so excited to have one position!

In retrospect, looking at those discernment questions, I see how those would have probably help me.

Did I *enter silence and listen* for God's instruction? No. I rushed ahead. Did I *hold my options*, giving weight to them equally? No, I literally put all my eggs in one basket (well not literally- there were no eggs and no basket).

The *feedback from my community* - my mom and spouse were not necessarily positive. There were some things in the transition, *options* that probably weren't going to be good, maybe even a bit *impractical*.

My gut was telling me this choice was what I had to make, it was going to be the solution. I did *examine the future* and I thought there was more security with the full-time chaplain role versus the *UNKNOWN* future of staying where I was. An undetermined unknown future is usually scary.

So, without much discerning I made the decision to accept that chaplain job, except the manager changed her mind about me and hired someone else! Wait wait, what? Why why why? Apparently God was saying: "not this, not now, wait." humpfh.

And then like David, Nathan advised me of God's other option. That, literally was Nathan, an elder from Battle Creek First Pres. The church needed some pastoral care help. Was I interested? That was almost ten years ago. If I'd been hired into that chaplain position I would never have been available to come here.

Sometimes we can see much more clearly what God's preferred future really is, in time. But often, in faith we are like the apostle Paul when he wrote:

We are pressed on every side by troubles, but not crushed and broken. We are perplexed because we don't know why things happen as they do, but we don't give up and quit. We are hunted down, but God never abandons us. We get knocked down, but we get up again and keep going (2 Corinthians 4:8-9, Living Bible).

Dr. Elizabeth Liebert, author and theologian whose academic focus has been spiritual discernment, said it this way:

We all make decisions constantly--some with careful reflection, some without much thought. But what if we understood these decisions, minor as well as major, as matters of faithful Christian living?

We could be so much more mindful in our day to day life and decisions, and probably would feel closer to God if we *were* more thoughtful about our decisions. I'm not saying you need to be discerning about every cookie that crosses your lips, but I probably do!

Thomas Merton who lived from 1915 to 1968, was a Benedictine, a contemplative monk, an American, at an abbey in Kentucky. I adapted one of his prayers last week; here it is again. Understand the honesty:

My Lord God,
 I have no idea where I am going
 I do not see the road ahead of me
 I cannot know for certain where it will end.
 Nor do I really know myself,
 and the fact that I think that I am following your will
 does not mean that I am actually doing so.
 But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you
 and I hope I have that desire in all I am doing.
 I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.
 And I know that if I do this, you will lead me on the right road
 though I may know nothing about it.
 Therefore, will I trust you always.
 Though I may seem to be lost
 and in the shadow of death,
 I will not fear, for you are ever with me
 and you will never leave me to face my struggles alone. Amen.

So we pray: "Give us patience, Lord, to listen to your voice, to wait for you to act. Save us from impatience and from wanting to run ahead of your timing for us."
 (a prayer written by David Adam)

AMEN.