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## We Need a King Like David

a sermon on Jeremiah 33.14-22

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King David was a poet and a warrior. Many of the psalms are attributed to him. As a boy he shepherded his father's sheep, and as a man he shepherded God's people. Along the way he was a hero in battle, a fugitive outlaw, and a lover. He was an adulterer, a terrible father, and a religious zealot. He was politically savvy. When King Saul turned against him because he feared David would rise to power, David refused to kill Saul because, he argued, the life of God's anointed king is sacrosanct. That principle served him well when he was king. Also, when David united the twelve tribes of Israel under his rule, he conquered Jerusalem and made it his capital. It was not a city of the northern tribes or even of his own tribe of Judah; it was David's own city.

When David was a boy, Israel was beset on all sides by enemies. When he was king, he defeated them all, expanded Israel's borders to their greatest extent, and brought peace. David was tough in a fight and persistent in adversity. When his son Absalom rebelled against him, and David had to flee the capital for his life, he tolerated verbal abuse, figuring God might somehow be behind it, teaching him a lesson. When he sinned, he was not above repentance. He loved God passionately, and as long as he was king, Israel never wandered into idolatry. He brought the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem, and in his joy he danced before it with an abandon that embarrassed his wife. He wanted to build a temple for God, but God said David had too much blood on his hands. His son Solomon would build it.

You probably think a king, especially a king like this, is the last thing we need. America was founded on the idea that kings are bad, and they are. Because human beings are broken and sinful, putting too much power into any one person's hands is a dangerous mistake. And yet, in the first century, there was nothing God's people wanted so much as a king like David. That was their dearest hope and dream. Why?

You have to remember that the Jews were a small nation sitting at a major geographic crossroad. This meant they got picked on by bullies a lot: Egypt, Assyria, Babylonia, the Persians, the Greeks, and the Romans. King David, despite some personal shortcomings, had been a great warrior who gave God's people independence and peace. And they wanted that again. Also, David had united God's people. Twelve tribes became a nation under him. After his son Solomon's death, Israel split into two

kingdoms that rarely got along. Only the destruction of the northern kingdom by the Assyrians made God's people one again, but of course by the time Jesus came along, they were badly divided religiously and politically. Finally, David had directed their hearts toward God. Peace, unity, and true religion are a lot to ask of any one person, but David delivered.

Also, God had made a special covenant with King David. God had promised a descendant of David would always rule over God's people. For a long time that was true, but the Babylonian exile brought an end to the dynasty of the house of David. And yet God's people persisted in their hope that God would keep the promise and restore the throne.

That's what our scripture reading is about. Jeremiah was a prophet of the exile. When everything fell apart, and it looked as if God's promises had failed, Jeremiah said no, just wait and see. He spoke for God to reaffirm God's special covenant with David. Had God broken that covenant? Of course not! He would sooner break his covenant with day and night. If day and night ever stop following one another, then you might start to worry. Nah, not even then.

God's faithful people had a name for their hope, a title for the man who would arise from the house of David to restore their glory: Messiah. *Messiah* is a Hebrew word meaning "anointed one." In the old days, a prophet would pour oil on a man's head to indicate that God had chosen him as king. Samuel, you recall, anointed David when he was still a boy. The Greek equivalent of Messiah is Christ. When we call Jesus "Christ," that's not his name, it's his title. We are saying he is the Messiah, God's anointed King chosen to rule over God's people and the nations.

In the first century, many would-be Messiahs arose to try to prove themselves. The test was simple: If you lead a successful revolution against Roman rule, you might be the Messiah. King Herod even tried to weasel in on the action. He renovated the temple, because restoring the temple was something the Messiah was supposed to do. He wanted to give himself as much legitimacy as possible. No one fell for it. Time after time rebel leaders who took up arms fell to the same fate, death at the hands of the Romans, either in battle or on a cross. Jesus never took up arms, but he ended up on a cross too, crucified under a sign that identified his crime: "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews."

Here's the crazy thing: After his death, Jesus' followers continued to insist that he is the Messiah. During his ministry, they had hoped he might be. Although Jesus never called himself the Messiah, he never rejected the title either. When Simon Peter said to him, "You are the Christ," Jesus replied that not only was Peter right but his confession was inspired by God. So there were all these hopes and expectations around Jesus, but then he did not do the most important thing the Messiah was supposed to do, lead an

army. And he did do the one thing that proved any would-be Messiah was a fake; he died on a cross. So why did his followers persist in calling him the Messiah?

Before we answer that question, let's go back and tackle another big one: Why do we need a king like David? I've already admitted kings are bad in principle. Why would we want one? Because we need what David gave Israel: peace, unity, and a heart for God.

I need to be careful at this point and very clear just what I am talking about. You might hear me say we need peace, unity, and a heart for God – and you might spiritualize those things, as if I mean we need inner peace (peace of mind) and unity within our congregation and individually to have hearts for God. This is true. And it is also true that Jesus can give us those things. And yet, if Jesus is God's Messiah, don't you think his job is a little bit bigger than that? It has to be. God loves the world. His mission is as big as the whole world. So if Jesus really is the Messiah, we ought to expect big things from him. When I say he brings peace, I mean world peace, as in no more wars. When I say he brings unity, I mean the unity of all Christians. Imagine Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, and all the varieties of Protestants united as one, not just in spirit or in some idea in a theologian's head, but really and truly one. And why stop there? Why not universal harmony among the human family? No more racial division; no more social or political division. But rather, the whole human race one big happy family. If your Jesus isn't up to that job, you're following the wrong Jesus. When I say he gives us a heart for God, I mean he finally settles all our religious questions: Is there a God? Which religion is right? How do we worship God? All the questions. He answers them decisively, convincingly, so that no one is left in doubt.

When I say Jesus is the Messiah, that's what I mean: world peace, unity, and true religion. Anything less sells God short and trivializes the office of Messiah. When we call Jesus "Christ" or "Messiah," we are saying he is the rightful ruler, God's anointed, the King! Did you imagine that was a small job? An apolitical job? Something "spiritual" that only happens in your heart? Did you think it was a metaphor? People call Elvis "the king," and that's a metaphor. When they call Jesus "King," they better mean it, because he did. He does.

If Jesus is the Messiah, then we should look to him for nothing less than universal peace, unity, and true religion. You'll notice, by the way, that this job description requires more of him than his fellow Jews in the first century were asking. They merely wanted political freedom, economic prosperity, and religious orthodoxy. But in this case, as always, Jesus both fulfills the old promise and goes so far beyond it that he explodes it and redefines it. That's probably why Jesus did not go around advertising himself as the Messiah. People were sure to misunderstand, as they almost always did. Even his own disciples expected him to lead a political revolution of some kind. Their idea of the kingdom of God was far too small. To them it was nothing more than Israel

free and prosperous and worshiping God according to the law of Moses. For Jesus, the kingdom was the universal rule of God, an undoing of sin and death, the glory of God visible and tangible to everyone. For Jesus it meant a new covenant, one that included all the nations. It meant eternal life and a new heaven and earth. We tend to be just like the disciples. Our vision of God's kingdom is far too small. If our nation is free, our community prosperous, our church flush with people and money, our bodies healthy, and our family members doing well – that's plenty. Add in eternal life, and what more could we want? None of those things is bad. They are all good, but Jesus wants more. His vision is bigger, and different in some ways. His goal is to restore the human race to Eden. That's what he thinks the Messiah has to do.

We call Jesus the Messiah, and right away a problem stumps us. If Jesus is the Messiah, he will bring world peace, unity, and knowledge of God. But we know none of those things has happened. War is constant. And unity? Where does that exist? Even the Christian church, the body of Christ, is badly divided. Our own denomination is divided by competing visions of what Christianity is and should be. As for knowledge of God, our world and our culture are torn by religious differences. We know it all too well, none of those things has happened.

We find ourselves in the same boat as Jesus' earliest followers. Jesus had not led an army to victory. He had died on a cross. Any sane Jew would have to conclude he was not the Messiah. If his movement was going to last, they would have to find a new Messiah, maybe Peter or James or someone else. But they neither gave up nor chose a new leader. They went on insisting that yes, Jesus is the Messiah. How could they do this? Because of the resurrection.

God raised Jesus from the dead. Jesus is alive, not just restored to his previous life, but now alive with the power and glory of God. This proved his claim. Ironically, Pilate was right: Jesus was the King of the Jews – and of the whole world! In light of this joyful, unexpected turn of events, Jesus' disciples realized two things: (1) Jesus is the Messiah. There could be no further doubt. But (2) this means Jesus had been right about the Messiah's job description and all the experts had been wrong. The offspring of David who fulfilled God's ancient and everlasting covenant would not simply be a repeat of the first David. He would do what David did – bring peace, unity, and a heart for God – but not just for Israel and not in the conventional way. He would do it for the whole world, and he would do it first by dying for the world and then by coming again to establish God's kingdom fully and finally.

His coming again is important, because he obviously has unfinished business. The church has always said so. His death on the cross was decisive. His resurrection assured his ultimate victory. So we know what he's going to do, and we know that he will do it. But he still has work to do.

So where does that leave us? We know that someday Christ will come again to set things right. He will establish God's kingdom. Peace, unity, and knowledge of God are not crazy dreams; they are the future. The problem is, from our perspective, that we do not live in the future. We live here and now. I confess that I do take a measure of comfort knowing that God will set things right. The evils, injustice, pain, and suffering won't go on forever. I can face them a little better knowing that good wins in the end. But I have to ask myself: Is that all Jesus gives me now? Do I have to wait until kingdom come – literally – to experience the blessings the Messiah gives? Or does he give me something tangible now while I am waiting?

Theologians call this living between Already and Not Yet. We live in a time when Christ has already defeated sin and death. He has already won God's victory. But that victory has not yet been fully realized. He has a big mopping up operation on his hands. Already our future has been secured, but we are not living in it yet. This age we are living in is kind of like being a teenager: You're grow up, but you're not. You're responsible, but not fully. It can be an exciting but definitely an awkward time. We live between the already of Jesus' resurrection and the not yet of his second coming.

The good news is: We do not have to wait until the end to experience the blessings the Messiah gives. He gives us quite a lot already, starting with his Spirit. The Holy Spirit lives within all who belong to Jesus Christ. Those who acknowledge his rule now already have his Spirit within them and with it his strength and resurrection power. This is no small thing. This is huge! Before Pentecost, God never lived within his people like this. They always had to maintain a safe distance. When David first tried to bring the ark to Jerusalem, a man died. To have God's Spirit live within you – that's a tremendous blessing, and you do not have to wait for it.

Another blessing you can experience right now is ... don't laugh, please ... the church. I know the church is imperfect. Believe me, no one understands that as well as a pastor does. Nevertheless, heaven is a world of love. We were made for community. And Christ has provided a community for us. All who acknowledge his rule, who call him Messiah, are part of his people and his family. He intends for church to be a safe place, a community that blesses you. He would love you through your brothers and sisters, and he would love them through you. We do not always get that right, for we are all broken people. But if he kept out the broken, he'd be all by himself.

This leads me to yet another blessing, he calls you to put his rule into practice right here, right now. God's kingdom has not yet come in all its glory, but wherever God's will is done on earth (just as it is in heaven), there is his kingdom really and truly. Christ wants you to play a part. He wants you to live as a kingdom person in the midst of this broken world. He wants you to shed a little light. This blessing may remind you of the boy who got excited when his Dad came home with a wrapped package and said, "I've got you a surprise." You can imagine the boy's joy when he opened a pair of

hedge trimming shears. “Now you can help me in the yard,” Dad exclaimed. “It’ll be fun, and it builds character.” You hear Christ’s call, and you say, “Whee, just what I wanted: a job to do.” But you know what? Dad was right. Helping with the chores did build character. Beyond that, however, you were created to make a difference. Most of us want to, although making a difference usually requires more sacrifice than we were hoping to make. Jesus is the Messiah, the King; and he wants to share his rule with you. He wants you to put God’s kingdom into practice in your home, your workplace, your church, your community. It’s a big job, but he is with you.

We do need a King like David. The world is a mess. We need peace, unity, and knowledge of God. Jesus fulfills the ancient promise, but he goes way beyond it. A human king is always a bad idea, because human beings are broken, so that too much power in any one person’s hands is bound to be misused. Jesus, however, is both God and Man. He is without sin, and therefore the only true king. David was a shepherd, and so Israel developed this tradition of the king as the shepherd of God’s people. Jesus picked it up. He said, “I am the Good Shepherd ... The Good Shepherd lays down his life for his sheep.” There’s a king that deserves your loyalty.

And your trust. One final thought: Is this too good to be true? World peace. Human harmony. True religion. Isn’t that too much to hope for? Not if Jesus rose from the dead!

I had a friend once who thought my hope in Jesus was naïve. He gave me that old line, “How can someone as smart as you believe something so ridiculous?” I said, “I guess you believe this life is all we get and we can never hope for anything better.” “Oh, no,” he answered. “This life is all we get, but I do believe that the human race will get better and better over time until we create a utopia of peace, harmony, and plenty for all.” I was flabbergasted. I said, “Let me get this straight: I believe that our only hope is for God to intervene and set things right, and that he will do this through Jesus. You believe that peace, justice, and universal contentment will come from the same race of beings that gave us war, the holocaust, slavery, child abuse, reality TV, and junk mail? And I am the one who’s naïve?” His response was, “Well, I have to hope.” And he was half right. You either give up or you go on hoping. I say it makes a lot more sense to put your faith in God than in anyone or anything else – especially because he has promised and he has raised Jesus from the dead.

So I call Jesus “the Messiah,” knowing full well what it means. And I go right on hoping and trying to put his kingdom into practice in any small way that I can. Because I know he is alive. He lives within me. And therefore I have a living hope. ... What about you?