

2 Samuel 23:1-7
1 Kings 2:1-9

SUMMER SERMON SERIES
Famous Last Words: David
First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham
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Ordinary 14

Continuing our summer series of “Famous Last Words,” there are two different scripture passages that are candidates for the last words of King David, just as there were with Moses. There is the Second Samuel passage that *should* have been the Last Words of David, labeled as such by the ancient compilers of these stories. These were the words where David reminded Israel of the promises of God. David is beloved as the ideal hero, the poet-king and Psalm writer. His life is an open book. The Bible makes no attempt to sanitize him, or to separate his private from his public life. Who David is, is what he does. Through everything he maintained the ability to show that the good things he did with his life were not about himself but about the Almighty God who first laid claim to him.

There are long lists of names in both these texts – 2 Samuel and 1 Kings. For the most part, it isn’t important that you remember them, only that you know what the list is. In 2 Samuel 23, what is said to be David’s last words is followed by the list of David’s “warriors,” David’s “mighty men” in some translations, David’s mercenaries and their heroic deeds. It is an interesting list because of two names – one that is on it and one that is not. The missing name is that of Joab. Joab was David’s right-hand man, his General, his best friend and ally. Without Joab, David would not have succeeded, would not have become who he was. In this list of David’s Might Men, Joab’s name was not omitted – it was deleted. The name that is *on* the list, significantly, is that of Uriah the Hittite. It appears at the end, as a punch-line, so you cannot miss it – Uriah the Hittite.

I’m sorry, but that takes us to another name, one that does not appear here, but is behind all of David’s last words – Uriah the Hittite’s wife, Bathsheba. If you don’t remember this Bible story (and it is one that isn’t heralded), one morning from the Castle roof, King David saw Bathsheba at her bath on her own roof, and he was smitten by her beauty. (2 Samuel 11.) He sent servants to fetch her and took her to his bed. Especially in those days, I suppose, you don’t say “No” to the King. Just in case she had become pregnant, David ordered Uriah home to Bathsheba, on leave. Uriah wouldn’t go; his comrades were on the front lines of battle with the Ammonites. So King David sent a letter to Joab saying, “Put Uriah on the front lines of battle and then pull back from him, so that he will be killed.” And that’s what happened. Others died also - collateral damage. And so King David took Uriah’s wife, Bathsheba as his own. The Bible doesn’t try to hide this.

Back to David’s last words. His *real* last words are found in our 1 Kings text, in a common Biblical scene. The ancient hero called his successor in to hear the last words. That successor was Solomon, the son born to David and Bathsheba. Adonijah was the oldest living son, the likely successor and probably the people’s choice.ⁱ But David had promised his paramour, Bathsheba (8th ? out of a dozen or more wives) that Solomon would succeed to the throne. And so it was. And all war broke out. There is a direct line from David’s affair with Bathsheba and the murder of Uriah to political assassination and civil war. Adultery, murder and a divided nation are the characteristics of the end of David’s reign. The 19th century German poet Heinrich Heine’s dying words were: “God will pardon me. It is his trade.” My friend Nathan Brown, poet laureate of Oklahoma, wrote as if in response: “There are, however, a dozen good women who will not, and they will make a point of not doing it.”ⁱⁱ

In our text from 1 Kings 2, as this long-brewing disaster is set in motion. David the dying King charged his son, Solomon, with keeping the law of Moses – that is, the covenant with God from Sinai. Having done the obligatory charge to faith matters, he turned to the political issues the new King Solomon was facing – consolidating his rule. We are accustomed to hearing about the “wisdom” of Solomon, but in this case “wisdom” meant rewarding friends and eliminating enemies. It meant cunning. Solomon’s purge made Watergate look like a picnic. Solomon had an “enemies list” with at least 4 major people on it – Shimei the Benjamite, his half-brother Adonijah, Abiathar the priest, and Joab – his father’s friend, ally and chief lieutenant.

Shimei was from the house of Saul, the previous King, and he once put a curse on David. David swore an oath of protection of Shimei - but Solomon had not. (Chalk this up to settling old scores.) Adonijah contested Solomon for the crown – the most serious threat. Abiathar backed the wrong horse. But Joab was the saddest sacrifice for political stability. David threw his oldest friend aside, for a clean transition. Joab himself had been guilty of political murder on David’s behalf, motivated by the same consideration (eliminating rivals). David was willing to risk Joab the warrior living, but decided not to stick his son, Solomon, with his old debts.ⁱⁱⁱ Joab knew the law, and sought sanctuary at Gibeon. Solomon’s new General, Benaniah, observed sanctuary (as per law) but Solomon said: “Joan predicted his own death. Give him what he asked for.” In all three reported cases, David had given Solomon justification for the actions he took. Solomon ruthlessly and efficiently carried out all the directives, and even got to make speeches about what he had done for the safety of the royal house. All of this sounds almost modern – the brutality and violence of the one-party state, and using tortured moral justifications to take advantage of others for political gain. In the famous last words of the First Duke of Valencia, Don Ramon Narváez y Campos, “I do not have to forgive my enemies. I have had them all shot.”^{iv}

These last words meant to set up the eternal dynasty of David. And early on we have here the notion of the divine right of Kings, the idea that the one to whom God gave power can do no wrong. (An idea that is sort of Lutheran, but not at all Calvinist!) Any theology that identifies itself with established power has pretty sketchy foundations. The prophet Samuel opposed the establishment of a state, with a King at the head. He warned – “Kings are takers!” and so they have been. It never ends well to delegate divine authority to a state with a monopoly on the use of force. Not a pretty story, but sometimes God has to work with what is available, even us.

There is a warning here. We have, at least in America, so tamed the Christian faith, watered it down and pressed it into the service of our culture, it’s a wonder we haven’t been struck by lightning. At least David, with all his excesses, maintained a healthy awe of his God. Yale law prof. Stephen Carter observed that we expect our politicians to have faith, as long as it doesn’t matter to them.^v The Religious Right can fiercely support issue-based politicians who show neither morals nor devotion, as long they have their Jesus merit-badge. And true, God does not choose us because we are good or have earned it, but does so to call us to holiness. But then we should be called there. These last words of David are words from the throne – not from the manger or the Cross. And reading the Gospels we find the people longing for the Messiah who will, in their minds, be the return of David. But in the Transfiguration, the gospel writers portray Jesus not as the new David, but rather the new Moses. David – shepherd boy, brave slayer of Goliath, writer of beautiful psalms – the corruption of Israel’s King remains a warning today. In 1963, Martin Luther King Jr. put it this way in his *Letter From Birmingham Jail*: “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly.” Ah, my King. Was she worth it?

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- ⁱ Bright, John. A History of Israel, Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1959, p. 207.
- ⁱⁱ Brown, Nathan. To Sing Hallucinated, Mezcalita Press, Norman, OK, 2015, p. 45.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Mendenhall, George. The Tenth Generation, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1973, p. 86.
- ^{iv} Op cit Brown, p. 53.
- ^v Carter, Stephen. The Culture of Disbelief, Anchor Books, 1994.