

“Not Getting Ahead of God”
2 Samuel 7:1-14a
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We need to begin with an understanding of what we are reading in 2 Samuel 7. This is a time of transition in the story about David in that things have settled down and he has time to contemplate the nature of his reign and the role of faith in it. But many scholars see this passage as commentary on the Davidic monarchy, an explanation for why the temple is built not by the great King David, but by his son Solomon.

God doesn't want David to build it, the text says, while noting the greatness of David's reign and the fact that his son will build God a house. It's always good to have an apologist defending your name in written records, someone filling in the gaps, making you look good.

But even though this story may be an explanation provided after the fact, just taking it as it is, it is a story with implications for us. Within the narrative, now that things have settled down, David notes that while he is living in a fine house made of cedar, no doubt inside the beltline, God's presence in the ark travels around in a tent.

In other words, for all practical purposes, God is homeless, and this just doesn't seem right to David. The symbol of God's presence ought to have a home and thus, by implication at least, he offers to build one. It seems like a noble sentiment, a way of giving back to the God who has done so much for him, and the prophet Nathan seems to agree. “Go, do all that you have in mind; for the Lord is with you,” he says.

Now, we might think Nathan is just another self-aggrandizing religious figure cozying up to power, someone willing to bless whatever the king wants to do. But as we will learn in a couple weeks, Nathan is no such figure. He is willing to lay the wood to David when he sins with Bathsheba and has her husband killed. Nathan genuinely thinks David is on the right track here.

But then God speaks to Nathan in the night and says “no” to David's offer. God hasn't asked for a house, doesn't need one right

now. God has been just fine moving among the people in a tent. So, “No thanks,” God says, “David’s reign will be memorable and his son will continue his work, but I don’t need a house.”

Eventually God will allow the building of a temple under Solomon. So, we have to wonder what is wrong with David’s offer. Perhaps timing is an issue, but there are weightier considerations here. For one thing, there is tension between recognizing God’s presence in any one place and the reality that God is everywhere. As the reading from Ephesians makes clear, God’s ultimate desire is to dwell within us. Though physical space remains important, we are the primary temple.

There is also the matter of David’s assumption that God thinks like him - a cedar house is better than a tent – when in truth God’s ways are not our ways and God’s thoughts are not our thoughts (Isaiah 55: 8).

But most of all, David doesn’t ask what God wants. He assumes that God wants what he would want. Or in the language of popular religion, he gets ahead of God, which is not really possible, but David does act before seeking divine input. This seems to be the real issue.

So, the message for us is that we don’t want to get ahead of God as individuals or as a church. Like David, we often act on our own and then seek God’s blessing after the fact, assuming that God wants what we want. Or we may think that since we have offered our lives to God, we have asked for guidance already in a general sort of way.

I think of seminary friends of a colleague who paused when they brought groceries home. Before putting them away, they would have a prayer to cover any meals they failed to bless until the next grocery store run. Sometimes our prayer life can function this way. “You know we want your guidance on everything, God, so just in case we forget to pray about some matter, keep guiding us,” we say in effect, knowing all the while the inadequacy of this approach. We know we need to seek God’s counsel before we act, but how exactly do we do that?

The place to begin is with humility, acknowledging that we need wisdom beyond our own and appreciating the reality that divine intent is often difficult to nail down. One of the problems with the popular perspective on not getting ahead of God is that it often assumes that

there is some simple way to solicit divine guidance. Directly seeking help from God is a critical step of discernment, we'll get to that, but before we do, we need to name the nature of this endeavor.

We're not talking about asking a mechanic a question about our car. We're talking about seeking the will of the Creator of the whole world. We're talking about approaching a Holy God for insight into how our individual life or how our part of the body of Christ here in this church best serves the larger purposes of eternity. It is no small thing we seek. Thus, humility is called for in how we go about this task and in how we talk about it as well.

One place where providential language can be used too boldly is in ministerial searches. Ministers and churches are seeking God's will for a good match, but to speak pointedly about *knowing* some action or decision is God's will is presumptuous. It is wiser to speak of our best sense of God's will, our best efforts at discerning divine intent, our trust after prayerful consideration, as opposed to *knowing for certain*.

The same can be said for any effort to seek divine direction. More pointed language tends to be manipulative. It's difficult to argue with someone who claims to *know* God's will. Furthermore, it is by definition difficult to be certain about something we take by faith which the author of Hebrews says is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen (11:1).

A recent issue of *The Christian Century* includes an article written by Princeton Theological Seminary president Craig Barnes entitled "Uncertain and Faithful". Barnes refers to a lecture he gave which inspired criticism. While talking about Jesus' experience in the wilderness, he said the temptation to jump from the temple, trusting that angels would catch him, was essentially the temptation to be certain of God's love, and this was a bad thing. The audience disagreed.

A week later, when he repeated the claim to a group of pastors, they argued. One of them said while pounding his fist on a table, "I am absolutely certain of our faith." Barnes told the man this was logically impossible, but in the article, he acknowledged that he should have said that having faith in God is far better than being certain about God. "Faith," he said, "can take us to holy realms certainty never can reach."

Indeed! Faith is not just different from certainty, it is larger, and in refraining from claims of certainty about God's will, we avoid the pitfall of attributing to God things with which God has nothing to do. I have shared the following bit of humor with some of you before.

There were the Scots who kept the Sabbath
and everything else they could get their hands on.

Then there were the Welsh who prayed on their knees
and on their neighbors.

Thirdly there were the Irish who did not know what
they wanted but were always ready to fight for it.

Lastly there were the English who considered themselves
a self-made nation, thus relieving the Almighty of a dreadful
responsibility.

There are many dreadful responsibilities of which the Almighty needs to be relieved. We need to begin with a strong measure of humility when seeking and talking about God's will.

That said, we need to seek God's will for any endeavor, not simply ask God to bless our ideas after the fact. If we have a major decision to make in our personal lives about where we live, what we do for a living, who we will spend our life with, we need to seek God's guidance before we make the decision. If we are considering significant plans for the church in regard to ministry or missions endeavors, new staff positions or building concerns, we need to seek God's counsel before we finalize our plans. We should gather all sorts of information about any endeavor and think through each decision or plan with an openness to divine guidance. But if we are serious about seeking wisdom beyond our own, we begin that process before we come to our conclusions.

The reality is the best-laid plans of mice and men often go awry anyway, according to Scottish poet Robert Burns. In today's reading

from Mark, Jesus plans to get some rest and re-center his life in God, but the crowds follow him and he ends up showing compassion on them and continuing his ministry rather than following his plan to rest. We planned to worship in this sanctuary on June 24, but when a motor burned out and its replacement did the same and left us with no air conditioning, we adjusted our plans and worshiped at Meredith College.

Planning is still a good thing. All Jazz musicians improvise, but the best improvisation is done by those with the most training and skill. The more thoroughly we plan, the better equipped we are to adjust to the realities life throws our way. But sometimes life happens while we are planning, and sometimes, God laughs, so we are wise to consider God's counsel up front. The question is as to how we do that.

It begins with genuine openness. We've all had the experience of someone asking us for advice but not listening to what we say. Either the person knows what he/she wants to do and is looking for affirmation or the person doesn't think there is any course of action that will work. Either way, we can't help because the person is not listening. If we're going to ask God for guidance, we have to be open to guidance.

We also have to know how to listen for God's voice. We don't know how Nathan hears God talking to him in the night. We often imagine that the ancients hear God in more explicit ways, perhaps even as an audible voice, but I suspect they have to work just as hard as we do to discern God's voice by listening with their hearts and souls, paying attention to life, trusting their feelings.

That's how we listen. We begin with genuine openness, we take time to center ourselves and focus on God and then we pay attention to our hearts, our thoughts and feelings; we pay attention to the details of life and somehow get the sense of where God is leading. Generally speaking, it will be in the direction of using our gifts where they are needed. God doesn't give us one set of gifts, interests and passions, and then call us to do something else. Frederick Buechner said that God calls us to the place where our deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet. That makes sense for individuals and churches, but the Devil lies in the details, God too, we pray. So, we listen with our hearts, we pay attention to life, we set aside time to focus on listening.

But there is one other thing we can do – seek the input and feedback of someone else, a mentor or guide like Nathan, a trusted friend, a fellow church member. It is one key reason the church exists - so that no one has to sort things out alone, so that we can provide a sounding board for each other, so that there are no lone rangers reimagining the church by themselves.

There is no guarantee the other person is any more in touch with God than we are. Mentors and guides can get it wrong. Even Nathan is off-base with his first response to David. So, we alone must make the call as to what we discern the Almighty is saying to us. But there is wisdom in seeking out another point of view, getting another set of eyes and ears on our concern, bringing another person's life experience to bear on the important things we ponder.

In the end, there is no formula to guarantee we get it right. That's where grace comes into the equation in addition to God's ability to weave the many-colored decisions of our lives into the great tapestry of divine intent. But as long as we genuinely seek God's counsel and want to follow it, we will be "O.K." Thomas Merton put it this way.

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 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 that I have that desire in all that 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 by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore I will 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 perils alone. (*Thoughts in Solitude*, p. 79)

“But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you.” Those are words by which to live. May we always have that desire.