



*Credit: Stuchie Art*

**Centre Congregational Church, UCC  
Brattleboro, Vermont  
December 24, 2023  
10:00am service**

**The Reverend Dr. Scott Couper  
Transcribed by A.I. and ZOOM**

**“Promises that Last Generations”**

**Scripture: II Samuel 7:1-11, 16**

Please be seated. Let us prepare ourselves to hear the interpretation of God's word in prayer. Let us pray. *Oh God, your word brings to us a message of love in the midst of despair. May we this morning absorb and receive that love despite our despair. Amen.*

Usually during Christmas the whole world, at least through the media, comes to Bethlehem and is hosted by the Catholic, Greek Orthodox, and Armenian Apostolic churches.

This week, *The Washington Post* reported in an article entitled “Jesus in the Rubble” that the atmosphere in Bethlehem tonight, on the eve of Christmas, is sad, dark, sad, and political. “This year there will be no tree, no parades, no bands for music, no lights no markets, no feasts, and no carols”. In short, at the most holy place on Earth tonight and tomorrow, Christians canceled Christmas.

Just because Christmas is canceled in Bethlehem does **not** give me license to cancel Christmas in Brattleboro, Vermont. Don't worry. I won't. In fact, I invite you all to what will be a beautiful candlelight service tonight at 7:00pm. Nonetheless, that Christians have canceled Christmas in Bethlehem **does** give me justification to interpret our scripture this morning in-light of what is happening in Palestine during bloody contestation that has occurred these last two months.

If you attended Sunday school as a child, perhaps you will remember three kings: Saul, David, and Solomon - in that order.

All three feature in our scripture reading this morning that Holly read for us. Previous to the first king, God was interpreted to not be in favor of theocratic monarchs. Yet, the Hebrew people insisted on having kings rule them like their neighbors. Eventually the first king, Saul, God found to be wanting. That is mentioned in the scripture. Saul's conduct proved that God's reluctance to have kings rule his chosen people was justified.

King David succeeded Saul. David is considered the greatest Hebrew ruler. He consolidated the nation. Yet, David was not perfect. Remember Bathsheba, the woman married to Uriah, who David had killed so that he could possess her (II Samuel 11)?

David's successor was Solomon, who, as we know, had more than a few wives. After Solomon, the kingdom divided.

How's that for several hundred years of history in a minute?

In our reading this morning we learned of what is called the 'Davidic Covenant' or the 'Davidic Promise'.

The quintessential verse of the reading records God promising to David, through the prophet Nathan, "Your house, and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever" (II Samuel 7:16).

However, there is a problem. The kingdom, and thus the house of God, the Temple, were destroyed, not once, but twice. The Babylonians first destroyed the temple and the kingdom in 586 BCE

For us as Christians and thus inheritors of the Hebrew faith tradition, Jesus' legitimacy and authority became predicated on his genealogical lineage to King David. Hence, Jesus was said, and is said, to be descended from the 'stump of Jesse' (Isaiah 11:1). Jesse was David's father.

Yet, another problem arose. Two of Jesus' disciples lamented bitterly on the road to Emmaus that Jesus did not re-establish the Davidic kingdom during his ministry as they had expected (Luke 24:13-35). In fact, Jesus was crucified! Following Jesus' crucifixion, the Romans destroyed the temple and thus the kingdom a second time in 70AD.

[Our Advent devotional makes the same point when the author states, "Back in Isaiah's day, lots of people thought the tree of Jesse, God's chosen line of leaders and saviors, had been cut down forever. They thought the promises of God had ended ...].

Some, like Isaiah, believed that it would come back, would be rediscovered someplace unexpected" (*All I Really Want* by Quinn Caldwell, p. 107).<sup>1</sup>

We can see within the Christian tradition that we are left three seemingly catastrophic failures as it regards the Davidic Promise. Truth be told, just like the like the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, my heart grows heavy when I hear every year in this sanctuary the refrain "and the government shall be on his shoulders" during the community Messiah Sing (Handel).

It is sung over and over again: "and the government shall be on his shoulders". I ask myself, just like the two who walked to Emmaus: 'When shall the government be on Jesus' shoulders?'

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<sup>1</sup> Not actually preached vocally in the sermon on the night. Yet, I reference this section of the devotional as it inspired by interpretation of the scripture from II Samuel.

Quinn Caldwell was referencing Isaiah 11:1. See December 23.

At this point, we need to remember that Jesus' ministry was not to establish a theocratic dictatorship. If we listen to Jesus' preaching, we hear that he came to establish the 'kingdom' or the 'realm' of God *within* those who follow his way. As Leo Tolstoy so beautifully remembered in this book, Jesus said in the gospel according to Luke, "the kingdom of God is within you".

To follow the way, means to love our enemies. Gosh! Is is not 'unconditional war' that is required; it is 'unconditional love'. To follow the way means to preserve all. To follow the way means to give comfort. To follow the way means "to turn swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks", as the prophet Isaiah (2:4) proclaimed, and thus to work for peace.

In the same way that Christians reinterpreted, through Jesus, what the Messiah was meant to accomplish, we as people of faith ought to reinterpret what it means for God to fulfill God's promises through the Davidic Covenant.

You see, I can't believe that God fulfills His promises to the benefit of one group against another group of people.

Was it God's will that Europeans established 'a City upon a Hill' at the expense of the American Indians? I don't believe so.

Was it God's will that Europeans established white supremacy southern Africa ultimately establishing the system of Apartheid? I don't believe so.

Is it God's will that the Jewish state of Israel was established at the expense of Jesus' own people: the Palestinians? Jesus was a Palestinian Jew (just as there are Palestinian Christians and Palestinian Muslims).

If we examine the gospel of Matthew (chapter 1), we see the genealogy of Jesus is recorded not just to King David. Rather, the biblical genealogy traces Jesus as a descendant all the way back to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Our Christmas narrative proclaims this. So, viewed genealogically, Jew, Muslim, and Christian are all related families with the same ancestors.

Given Jesus' lineage, how could God wish the destruction of one family over another? Friends, this Christmas I believe it would be a Christian heresy to directly associate the ancient kingdom ruled by David with the current nation-state of Israel.

And I believe that Jesus never intended to revive the ancient kingdom of David to restore it to regional or global supremacy. Nor do I believe, as our contemporary, fundamentalist, and evangelical brothers and sisters do, that God's plan or will for the world is somehow dependent upon the geopolitics of today's age.

Friends, what are we to do with God's covenantal promise to David and God's promise that his house is to be established forever?

This morning, I offer two possible interpretive suggestions.

The first is that in our scripture, David offered to build God a house. The prophet Nathan consulted God and God replied, 'No, thank you, David. It is not you who establishes a house. It is not you who builds. It is me that builds'.

We must remember that as a people of faith, that the realm is not established unilaterally by us and certainly not by our geopolitical mechanizations and warfare. God establishes the realm of God in partnership with us through hope, peace, joy, and love.

And how does God partner with us? I believe that God establishes the realm of God within us. The realm of God within us is the true *promise that will last us generations*.

We must internalize the realm as Jesus taught and follow Jesus' way. The Davidic kingdom will be, and is established, through our love for one another.

This is the Christmas message, this is the message of 'Emmanuel': God with us.

Friends, if you are people of faith, then love and work for peace in this world.

This is the Word of God. It was preached to all of you, the people of God. An the people of God resopned, "Amen".