

A DYNASTY, OF SORTS

A Sermon for the Fourth Sunday in Advent, December 18, 2011

Text: Luke 1:26-38 (plus the other readings for the day)

“He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David.” (Luke 1:32)

Auspicious words. Jesus has not even been born yet, not even conceived, and his inauguration, his coronation is being announced!

Ambitious words. The throne of David went bust centuries ago. Jeremiah swore that no one else from his line would sit on the throne! Yet now, the throne is being burnished for a new heir.

Amazing words. Mary, a nobody from nowhere—a virgin from Nazareth (and they always say “Can anything good come from Nazareth?”) this Mary is to be mother of the Son of the Most High.

At the end of a year, I like to put together a photo album which “tells the story” about that year. Of course, it is always very incomplete. It usually shows birthdays, vacations, visits from family, and a few other highlights. Much of our life does not get photographed, such as our work. Or the occasions that are not so happy.

Today’s Gospel reading is one beautiful snapshot from such an album. The first reading, from 1 Samuel, is another great snapshot from the same album; and the album seems to have something to do with King David . . .

But in the Second Reading from Romans 16, we find what the *whole album* is about—all the beautiful snapshots of great moments, such as the two other readings; but also every *one* of the highlights, plus the drudgery, and even the disappointments. It is about what? Apparently it is all about some project of God, the purpose of which was and is (and we should put this on the title page of the album) “To Bring About the Obedience of Faith.”

Oh, the album—better known as the Bible—has all sorts of pictures in it: anointings and coronations, battles and pilgrimages and exiles, orchards and lakes and deserts and mountains, lots of sheep and donkeys and a few camels, chase scenes and healings and wrestling matches. There is deception and trickery and sacrifice, thunder and lightning and earthquakes. There are many stories about parents and children, especially about babies being born.

One snapshot, our Gospel reading, is of that moment when Mary (we know her) got the shocking news that she, still a virgin, was going to give birth to a baby, who would be great, who would be called the Son of the Most High, i.e., God. She looks nonplussed. But the angel convinced her that God would do this, and she agreed.

Just a tiny snapshot, but with lots of interesting details. Front and center is the miracle that a dynasty which has been dead as a doornail for centuries, is going to have new life because her son will revive it. This is as big as the miracle that a virgin would have a baby. That dynasty *has*

no throne, and Mary knows it. But there is a strong yearning among the people of Israel that David would come back and raise them up once again to be a free and strong land under God.

That other snapshot, in 1 Samuel, reveals a moment in the 50-year rule of David when he humbly asked God if he could build a house for him in Jerusalem, to give God more of a presence among his people. God demurred, saying he was always happy with a tent. Rather, God would give David an eternal dynasty of successors. (Hey, that's the theme our Gospel picks up.)

Other snapshots are essential to getting the gist of the album titled "To Bring About the Obedience of Faith":

God arguing with Samuel that the people are wrong to want a king in the first place. No dynasty can do for the people, or for God, what needs doing. Which is, the people are to be led by God himself, in their hearts, out of love for him because of all he has done for them.

Another: Jeremiah, furious with Israel, prophesying that no more heirs of David will ever sit on the throne of Judah.

Another, also Jeremiah: Representing God's love to his people, he promises that God will make a new covenant with his people, and this time God will write his law on their hearts, so they won't need to be told all the time to "know the Lord."

One from the beginning of the album shows Adam and Eve being given their existence and freedom by God, to enjoy in fellowship with God. (No commandments yet, in that picture.)

The commandments are in another snapshot, taken at Sinai: "I will be your God, and you will be my people. Listen to my voice and keep my commandments."

And so it goes. There were ups and downs in the dynasty, mostly downs, because this album we call the Bible actually goes heavy on reporting devastating disappointments and scathing indictments. God was always seeking a people; the people were abusing their freedom by turning away from God, and their repentances only lasted a short while.

Throughout, God was working to establish a relationship with the *whole world*, by means of Israel.

Isaiah 49:6 "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.

And salvation always meant *the obedience of faith*. A special form of obedience. Not just the following of rules. Not slavish adherence to the letter of the law. But rather, life freely lived before God in a loving fellowship with all of God's children.

Late in the album, along comes Jesus. We notice that he never looks to be angry with sinners, but rather with those who promoted a lesser sort of obedience. Jesus established his beachhead among sinners, with the help of theologically illiterate fishermen. And although he said he did not remove any point of the law, he preached to them that the law does not save because it cannot remove the burden it places on us. "**My yoke is easy,**" Jesus said. "Come over here, and follow me."

Which reminds me of another snapshot from the album “To Bring About the Obedience of Faith”:

The people complained to Rehoboam (Solomon’s son, about to become the new king), “Your father made our yoke heavy, but you must lighten it for us.” But Rehoboam answered them thus: “My little finger is thicker than my father's loins. Now, whereas my father laid on you a heavy yoke, **I will add to your yoke**. My father disciplined you with whips, but I will discipline you with scorpions.”

Jesus, on the other hand, did not come to add to the yoke the law had already placed on humanity. He came to make us love God, trust God. He came to create a Cardiac Dynasty, which would rule from inside, all over the world. He did not come to slay the enemies, as David did by the tens of thousands; he came *to die for* God’s enemies, each and every one.

Today, Advent IV, is a dynastic holiday, of sorts. Before we commune, we will sing our own version of the cheers of the people of Jerusalem, on that day when they thought Jesus was coming to take David’s throne. The short version, which infuriated temple officials, was: “Hosanna to the Son of David.” The version Mark reports is:

“Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! 10 Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

We’ll use yet another version of those cheers, but the idea is the same. We will be saying: “We want our picture in the album, too!” “Take a picture of us with Jesus!” Because we, too, believe he came to bring about the obedience of faith in our own hearts! And when we take his body and blood, we will be thankful that to do this, he came to be born of Mary. Amen.

