

## *How Can This Be?*

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2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16; Luke 1:26-38  
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Advent and Christmas are seasons of hope and humility. It is a season with two aspects: it is a time of *waiting*, and it is waiting...for *God's action*. (1) The act of *waiting* invites and requires humility. (2) *God's action* invites and evokes hope. Hope and humility are the words of this season; which suggests that hope and humility are the words of our Savior Jesus and his kingdom.

Our two texts today, which Mike just read for us, from 2 Samuel 7 and Luke 1, are both crucial passages for the narrative of Jesus and his kingdom. Both of them move the overall plot along in significant ways. And they both lead us towards hope and towards humility.

2 Samuel 7, which may be less well known among us, is a foundational text that announces the enduring promise of God – the unconditional commitment of God to God's people – to establish a kingdom. It will be a kingdom in the midst of the historical process, but it is rooted and grounded in God's purposes, that are larger than any particular historical moment. "Your house and your kingdom," God says to David, the sovereign king of Israel, through the prophet Nathan, "shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever." According to this text, David and his descendants may sin and commit iniquity, but God promises never to take away God's steadfast love. The church's understanding of God's unconditional love traces its lineage to this text. In Romans 8, when the apostle Paul declares that nothing shall separate us from God's love for us in Jesus Christ, that declaration has its roots in 2 Samuel 7.

Luke 1 is the astonishing announcement to Mary – a young peasant woman from the backwater town of Nazareth in Galilee – that though she is not yet married, though she is a virgin, she will bear a son who will fulfill the promise made to King David and the deepest hopes of the people of Israel, a son who will – in words that echo 2 Samuel 7 – "reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." 'For nothing will be impossible with God.' 2 Samuel 7 and Luke 1 work together.

The characters in these stories – King David in Jerusalem and Mary, from Nazareth in Galilee – are about as far apart from each other on the social spectrum as they can be. David is at the top. He is the king, the sovereign ruler, who has power and wealth and force at his disposal. Mary, on the other hand, is of the poor and vulnerable.

All of us can find ourselves somewhere between David and Mary. There may be *some* situations in which we will identify with David, in his role or his status or his responsibility. And there may be other situations in which we will identify with Mary, in her vulnerability, her poverty, in the ways that she lived away from the centers of power.

What we can see from these texts is that God is ready and willing to use them both.

At the beginning of 2 Samuel 7, King David rather presumptuously announces that he is going to do God a favor. He will set out to build a house or a temple for God. "Here I am," he says, "living in a fancy house of cedar, while the ark of God stays in a tent." You can almost hear the king feeling sorry for God. David imagines that out of his own great thoughtfulness, he will help God out and do God a favor. But God quickly dispenses with the king's misperceptions of who is in charge here, saying to him, "I've been just fine in my tent, David. I'm a camper. I rather prefer being free." "But enough about me," God goes on, "let me tell you what I am going to do for you and for my people. I will build *you* a house." I will make of you a dynasty, David; I will use you as an instrument of my steadfast love that will never end. Now, you can see why a king would enjoy hearing about an everlasting dynasty, and as the story of David continues, we see that his powerful ego has some difficulty allowing *God* to guide him, rather than his own royal ambitions. David has trouble allowing the spirit of humility to guide him, which is not entirely surprising for someone with so much power. Nevertheless, the text announces that God is making an everlasting covenant, to stick with this people through thick and thin, a covenant which is a source of hope that never runs out.

But God is not only able to accomplish things through the mighty and the powerful. In fact, God often finds more willing participants among the poor. And for God's greatest act, the act of bringing forth the Messiah, the Savior, the King of all, God chose Mary. The text does not tell us of any particular credentials that qualified Mary for her role – because God does not need people with any particular credentials. God just chose her. "You will conceive and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be called the Son of the Most High." The most important thing is never our qualifications or our talents. The most important thing is God's choosing of us, and our willingness to let God lead us. When God chooses us for a role, God gives us all that we need for that role.

In response, Mary asks a very reasonable question, a question that we may always ask when we hear of God's promises – whether they are promises of a baby born to a virgin, or a promise of a hopeful future for a polarized society, or promises of racial justice and reconciliation, or promises of well-being for us and our loved ones – Mary asks, "How can this be?" How can this future happen? I'm a virgin, Mary says. That's not possible. We may say, Things are too difficult in our world, too broken, too bleak. A promising future doesn't seem practical.

God says, "Nothing will be impossible with God."

And then Mary says, in words that become a paradigm for faithful responsiveness to God: "Here I am, the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word." At this point, Mary cannot see all that will unfold. She cannot see the deeds of power and the acts of mercy that her son will do. She cannot see the suffering that her son will endure, as the prophet Simeon tells her in Luke 2, the "sword that will pierce her own soul." She cannot see how he will be crucified and then raised from the dead. And yet she places her life, her future, her reputation in the hands of God. Mary becomes a model for us of humility, that does not try to claim or do more than belongs to her, *and* of hope, that trusts God to accomplish God's purposes, including those purposes that involve her.

The news of this week, the news of Christmas, encompasses the entire spectrum of human existence. It addresses the high and mighty of the earth, and it addresses the poor and vulnerable. It lifts up the lowly and it brings down the powerful from their thrones. It is good news of great joy for all people, not just for some. The news of this week is news of deep and enduring hope. And, it is news that invites and requires humility. For when we are proud and controlling, we will not make room in our lives for the Christ child; we will not realize how much we need the Christ child; we will think that Christ can't help us with our problems; we will think that Christ will just slow us down; like King David, we may presumptuously think that we are the ones who need to help Christ out in some way.

Our hope is for Christ's kingdom, not our own; Christ's kingdom, which is coming and which is already here. Will we make ourselves available to God, to open our hearts to the Lord, to let it be with us according to God's word? To God, and to God alone, be all of our honor, all of our glory, all of our praise. Amen.