

*Read the Whole Text*

2 Samuel 5

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In commentaries on this passage, the word most frequently used is “consolidation.” This text represents the consolidation of Israel as a nation beneath one monarchy - essentially, a merging of Judah, the Southern Kingdom, and Israel, in the north. These two countries were themselves forces composed of multiple tribes. So to say that Israel was consolidated is to acknowledge the unification of multiple tribes and two kingdoms into one country. This word is used in another sense, too - the consolidation of David’s power as the new king. The youngest and ruddiest of Jesse’s sons had made his name as a guerrilla and saboteur. Now that King Saul is dead, working from the southern capital of Hebron, David wins the tributes of all the tribal strongmen. Soon he moves, by means of both physical strength and political savvy, to Jerusalem to lead the United Kingdom. So consolidation refers to the formation of a new government and to David’s personal power.

The historian’s narrative tells a very tidy story. It was all according to God’s plan, says the Biblical storyteller. It couldn’t have happened any other way. But scholars of this text have taught us to embrace some critical questions about this text. Amidst all this “consolidation,” who’s telling the story and what’s their agenda? Whose stories weren’t included? Who was benefited by these changes? Our understanding of the text is further complicated by worship, where the readings we hear are selective and euphemistic. Many truths are better left unsaid. Much is read between the lines. “David grew greater and greater,” we read, “and the Lord God was with him.” David became Israel’s leader and Israel became a single monarchy because that was God’s design for king and country. But if you have time to read more than the ten verses we have time for in worship, the full story is more complex and raises spiritual questions for us about all involved.

In the shadow of David’s political triumph are the cruelties of his invading army. On the underside of his personal celebrity are private vices and intimate violations. Between the many iterations of God’s approval of David’s conduct - “and the Lord said,” “as the Lord commanded,” “the Lord God was with him” - are details that will raise questions in the heart of any faithful reader. And on occasion, according to the Biblical storyteller, God thunders in judgment against king and country. Is David really so virtuous as he appears? Is the nation of Israel as sacred as the text suggests? Are God’s purposes really so clear? There is more to the text than what we have time to read in worship. There’s even more to the text than what is written on the page.

Just in this chapter are mentioned individuals and communities about whom we know very little. Ancient Hebrew manuscripts are indecipherable in passages concerning those who previously occupied the land becoming the new capital city, so most translators just take a guess and complete the sentence in a way that makes sense to them. In truth we know very little about the Jebusites who occupied the land first. A similar point can be made about David’s frequent antagonists the Philistines. If ever there was a people whose history was written by their conquerors! And who were these women? Mentioned only as “David’s other concubines and wives?” We don’t read about them in worship - but all these people are in the text, too. We know

just enough about them to know that they existed. The historian gives no words to them, but they are included in God's Word.

We can sense why this biblical narrative is so often projected onto our own country. American exceptionalism was preceded by biblical notions of Israel's singular importance. Our civil religion casts American presidents in divine light that scripture first shined on King David. The Hebrew Bible scholar Robert Alter notes in his comment on today's text how unsettlingly close the story of King David can come to the story of our own nation. David chooses Jerusalem as the capital of the United Kingdom because of its central location belonging neither to the north nor the south, the "same logic" that Americans used to situate Washington DC between Maryland and Virginia so that it would not belong to any particular state. Here we are for worship on the Fourth of July. Independence Day has fallen on the Sabbath. So it's hard not to notice how the biblical story is echoed in our national story. And if we know that the Biblical history has silenced certain voices, how much more can we see that our nation is responsible for similar sins.

In the fire and color of Independence Day, let us remember that the Fourth of July did not represent freedom for enslaved people. African American communities remember their liberation on Juneteenth. Black stories are in the text, too. Who would know, visiting the Statue of Liberty today, what pain and suffering has touched immigrants and refugees among us in recent years. Their stories are in the text, too. In June, we hung a pride flag in front of our house. It made me think about the pandemic we have all lived through in the past year. I have often reflected on how LGBTQ people, especially gay men, were devastated by the AIDS epidemic. As I see those flags today I think - yes, their stories are in the text, too.

We have our ostentatious civic piety. "In God We Trust." Monuments to the Ten Commandments. The national prayer breakfast. Public devotion for political gain. And in a culture so consumed by power - who's got it, who doesn't, and how to get it? Who's in and who's out, and how long until the next election? - then we are also called to ask ourselves what are the costs and consequences of our fixation on consolidating power? But what are the truths left unsaid? What are we left to read between the lines? What's on the shadow side of King David's public image?

The Word of God is what is written in all of Creation. These details may not be read aloud - but they are still in the text. So as people of faith - or as citizens of a Biblical nation - God calls us to be close readers. Read the full text. Read between the lines. Listen deeply for all the truths that go left unsaid.

There are people we have missed. There are stories we have not heard. But they are all there in the text. They are created in the image of God. They are gifts of God's holy Word.