

*“Too Many Angels”*

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

World AIDS Day/Christ the King Sunday, November 25, 2012

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Holy Scriptures: 2 Samuel 23: 1-7    John 18: 33-37

**2 Samuel 23: 1-7**

*The Last Words of David*

Now these are the last words of David:

The oracle of David, son of Jesse,

the oracle of the man whom God exalted,

the anointed of the God of Jacob,

the favorite of the Strong One of Israel:

2 The spirit of the Lord speaks through me,

his word is upon my tongue.

3 The God of Israel has spoken,

the Rock of Israel has said to me:

One who rules over people justly,

ruling in the fear of God,  
4 is like the light of morning,  
like the sun rising on a cloudless morning,  
gleaming from the rain on the grassy land.

5 Is not my house like this with God?

For he has made with me an everlasting covenant,  
ordered in all things and secure.

Will he not cause to prosper  
all my help and my desire?

6 But the godless are all like thorns that are thrown away;  
for they cannot be picked up with the hand;  
7 to touch them one uses an iron bar  
or the shaft of a spear.

And they are entirely consumed in fire on the spot.

### **John 18: 33-37**

33 Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?”<sup>34</sup> Jesus answered, “Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?”<sup>35</sup> Pilate replied, “I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What

have you done?”<sup>36</sup> Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.”<sup>37</sup> Pilate asked him, “So you are a king?” Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.”

## Sermon

### **King David and Christ the King**

King David, who shepherded flocks and wrote psalms,

who led armies and danced into the temple

was equally comfortable with the arts and natural sciences.

King David knew his way around imagery.

When he reflected on the human condition

his words were interwoven with images from nature.

David said the Spirit of the Lord is upon me,

and the way he shared the Spirit with us was quite poetic.

*The God of Israel has spoken,*

*the Rock of Israel has said to me:*

*One who rules over people justly,  
ruling in the fear of God,  
is like the light of morning,  
like the sun rising on a cloudless  
morning,  
gleaming from the rain on the  
grassy land.*

*Is not my house like this with God? --2*  
Samuel 23: 3-5a

One biblical version translates the Hebrew as,

*“He that ruleth must do so justly.”*

In his last days, with his last breaths

the King of Israel reflected on his many years of

ruling in the fear of God,

ruling with respect for God,

ruling as one willing to do whatever God commands  
and wills,

ruling as one who trusts and obeys God

*is like the light of morning, like the sun rising on a  
cloudless day...*

***Is not my house like this with God?***

Are you like me, giving thanks to God every day?

Every single morning that I get up and go to work,

I look up into the sky and say a prayer of gratitude.

*“God, I am so grateful for this opportunity to serve you in your world!”*

I look up into the sky and admire the weather,

and reflect on what a beautiful day it is,

regardless whether there are storm clouds or it's a cloudless day,

bright with the light of the morning.

Pilots call cloudless days “pristine perfect”,

meaning that from horizon to horizon there is nothing but blue sky.

***Is not my house like this with God?***

In his last days, with his last words and oracle,

King David imagines the pristine perfect sky filled with the light of God

illuminating all that the ruler does and says,

holding up the deeds and words of the ruler

to be considered and examined by

God in the light of day.

The character of the ruler will be examined and judged in the light.

King David grasped this insight in his last days

as well in various times in his life (on some occasions better than others),

and passed it on to us as words of wisdom gleaned from experience.

***Is not my house like this with God?***

Now, it would be really cool at this point to go on and on and on

about the qualities and character gifts and flaws

of rulers in the nation and around the world.

You and I could have a field day picking apart or lauding the principalities and powers.

However, here is the direction the Word is going today:

The Word calls us to address and assess the character of a different ruler.

33 Then Pilate entered the headquarters again,

summoned Jesus, and asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?”

36 Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not from this world.

If my kingdom were from this world,

my followers would be fighting

to keep me from being handed over to the  
Jews.

But as it is, my kingdom is not from  
here.”

37 Pilate asked him, “So you are a king?”

Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king.

For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to  
testify to the truth.

Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my  
voice.”

Any talk of kings and kingdoms is problematic for us.

This is a problematic subject because we do not live in a  
monarchy.

Kings and kingdoms are beyond our experience.

Changing the language slightly only helps slightly.

We can alter Kingdom, which sounds so masculine and archaic, to  
something else.

Do you prefer sovereign? How about domain?

Language is still tough to grasp, slightly out of reach, still just

beyond our experience.

N.T. Wright speaks of the Kingdom of God as the Dream of God.

Martin Luther King, Jr., spoke of the Beloved Community.

A classic prayer offers these words of thanksgiving:

“Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, Ruler of the Universe,  
who brought forth from the earth bread.”

At the core of the Kingdom of Heaven, the Domain, the Great  
Banquet,

the Dream of God, the Beloved Community,

is a blessed experience in which the whole people  
of God

yoke with the Creator

and gather as one to work and play,  
serve and love,

give generously and live  
faithfully

together in the light of  
day.

The vision foretells of “God’s rule of grace in the world,

a future period foretold by the prophets of the Old  
Testament



and identified by Jesus as beginning with His public ministry.

The Domain of God is the experience of blessedness...”[1]

The Beloved Community is the diverse peoples of the world integrated into one,

striving to do the work and will of God.

The Dream of God is the building of community

where previously one did not exist

except in a dream, as a vision, an unfulfilled hope born of a promise,

a Dream of God that can only be realized through prayer and hard work

and intentional efforts at hospitality and healing.

No one ever said it was going to be easy

or that there won't be conflict or disagreement,

raised voices or hurt feelings,

yet in the process, in the journey toward the dream, in the walk

is the experience

of building and being and becoming

a Beloved

## Community.

Have you ever gotten discouraged, dissuaded, or disenchanted?

When was the last time you thought that this hope of a Beloved Community

is never going to be realized,

that it's not going to happen, at least not in our lifetime.

And yet, my friends, the Good News is Jesus Christ has shown us

when we have not been far from the Kingdom of God,

when we have been this close to realizing the Dream

when we have caught a glimpse of the Beloved Community.

Two girls softball teams played for the league championship.

With the home team down two runs and a runner on base, the batter hit a homerun.

The crowd and her teammates went wild.

However, as she rounded second base she tripped and fell,

tearing the cartilage in her knee.

If her teammates picked her up or helped her to advance,

the base runner would be disqualified and her homerun disallowed.

Suddenly two girls on the field reached down and helped her to her feet.

Knowing that they were aiding the enemy, in effect,

that her score would decide the championship,

they guided her to third base, and then down the baseline to home.

In that moment they -- and we -- caught a glimpse of heaven in the light of day.

We run into situations on a regular basis

that are just bordering on the Beloved Community.

A glimpse inside is a moment of grace.

Look for them. Celebrate them. Make them happen. Be present and be aware.

For example, one of the scribes came near and asked Jesus,

“Which commandment is the first of all?”

Jesus answered, “The first is,

‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one;

you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart,

and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ 31 The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’

There is no other commandment greater than these.”

Then the scribe said to him, “You are right, Teacher;

you have truly said that ‘he is one, and besides him there is no other’;

and ‘to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding,

and with all the strength,’ and ‘to love one’s neighbor as oneself,’

—this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.”

When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him,

“You are not far from the kingdom of God.” (Mark 12: 28-34)

A glimpse inside is a moment of grace.

You are so close to the kingdom, to the Dream of God, that you can taste it.

Your confession of faith opens a window,  
your hand reaching out to serve opens a door,  
your selfless giving opens new horizons  
and gifts the world with a pristine perfect  
sky.

Tom Hanks played a lawyer in the movie "Philadelphia".

His character was stricken with AIDs, and when his law firm found out, he was fired.

He hired an up and coming attorney played by Denzel Washington to represent him.

Great story, script, cast, and director.

It gave the gift of dignity to families and individuals suffering from AIDS and HIV.

When Tom Hanks won the Academy Award for Best Actor, he said:

*I would not be standing here if it weren't for two very important men in my life...*

*Mr. Rawley Farnsworth, who was my high school drama teacher,*

*who taught me to act well the part, there all the glory lies.*

*And one of my classmates under Mr. Farnsworth,*

*Mr. John Gilkerson.*

*I mention their names because they are two of the finest gay Americans,*

*two wonderful men that I had the good fortune to be associated with,*

*to fall under their inspiration at such a young age.*

*I wish my babies could have the same sort of teacher, the same sort of friends.*

*And there lies my dilemma here tonight.*

*I know that my work in this case is magnified by the fact*

*that the streets of heaven are too crowded with angels.*

*We know their names.*

*They number a thousand for each one of the red ribbons that we wear here tonight.*

*They finally rest in the warm embrace of the gracious creator of us all.*

*A healing embrace that cools their fevers,*

*that clears their skin,*

*and allows their eyes to see the simple, self-evident,*

*common sense truth that is made manifest*

*by the benevolent creator of us all*

*and was written down on  
paper*

*by wise men, tolerant men,*

*in the city of Philadelphia  
two hundred years ago.*

*God bless you all. God have mercy on us all. And God bless  
America.*

God has mercy, and every soul is a beneficiary of God's mercy.

The nature of the Ruler of the Universe is to include every soul.

Those who can't qualify in our eyes are loved by God.

Those who are cast out of society or the community or the church  
are welcomed in by God.

What is the character of the Ruler of the Universe

is the fundamental core question of the Kingdom of God.

Our answer to this core question should then guide our response to  
AIDS, HIV,

and how to live with and love one another.

When the great tennis player Arthur Ashe died of AIDS in 1995,  
my family and I were living in Jackson Tennessee.

We grieved the loss of a courageous warrior

who stood up for his sport, his family, and his race – the human race.

We continue to grieve for the incredible, senseless loss

of so many wonderful souls who have died far too young due to AIDS and HIV,

including the young man who rescued me from drowning at age 14,

and a childhood friend of Betty's,

and our neighbors the world over.

The week after Arthur Ashe died, I learned from a teenage neighbor

who was present on Sunday morning in the largest church in the city of Jackson

that the preacher spoke out against Arthur Ashe

and said that God condemned

all who suffer from AIDS and are HIV positive.

You know, they say the church is the only army that shoots its wounded.

Far too often we reject or neglect or subject those who need love the most.



Shame on us when we fail,

and good for humanity when we do as God wills.

Have you ever wanted to sit down and have a conversation

with those who judge people who suffer and hurt

and condemn them to hell? What would you say?

You may consider asking a question or two along these lines:

Do you realize what you are saying about the character of God?

Do you mean to imply that a God of grace and love

would inflict cruel and unusual punishment on the children  
of God?

In effect, punish them forever?

If someone asks you for bread, do you give them a stone?

If grace is true, would you deny hope and healing to a child of  
God?

My experience of the mercy of God is that if grace is true, all will  
be saved.

Please don't ever let a few biblical verses deter you from being  
gracious,

from encouraging another soul to catch a glimpse of the Beloved Community.

Far too often has the Holy Bible been used as a weapon of hate rather than a tool for grace.

The Holy Bible serves to point us to God, but we do not worship this or any book.

You can either have a perfect God or a perfect Bible, but you cannot have both.

That is biblical, according to Jesus.

Jesus continually chose to look for grace in the law, and preferred love to legalism.

The Prophet Joel (Joel 2: 13) reminds us of the character of God, saying,

*“Return to the Lord, your God, for [God] is gracious and merciful,*

*slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing.”*

The Church of Jesus Christ is called and commissioned to reflect the character of the Ruler of the Universe.

King David, Christ the King, and your own practice of faith hit the nail on the head.

You are so close to the kingdom, to the Dream of God, that you can taste it.

A glimpse inside is a moment of grace.

*Serving with respect of God*

*is like the light of morning,*

*like the sun rising on a cloudless morning,*

*gleaming from the rain on the grassy land.*

*Is not your house like this with God?*

(2

Samuel 23: 4-5a, Adapted)

So, let's practice safe sects!

That is, practice being a safe S-E-C-T.

Practice being a model and means and mission station

for becoming and building the Beloved Community.

*All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!*

[1] Youngblood, Ronald F., General Editor; F.F. Bruce and R.K. Harrison, Consulting Editors, *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson) 1997, c1995.