

**Sunday, December 24, 2017 – Fourth Sunday of Advent**  
**“First Things First”**

2 Samuel 7: 1-16

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Multiple Perspective Narrative Structure

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.

King David was feeling a little guilty. Embarrassed, even as he reclined in his glorious new palace. It had been quite the past few years – David was the youngest of eight boys, a lowly shepherd working in the fields when a prophet named Nathan discovered him based purely on God’s direction. Young David killed a Philistine named Goliath, a great warrior from a people who had invaded Israel. David gained favor with the King and rose to become a general in Saul’s army. Saul and developed a deep friendship with the prince, Jonathan. Soon Saul became jealous of David’s fame and tried to have him killed. After Saul was killed in battle, David leads God’s army to victory of the enemies and becomes King. Israel was finally at peace and prosperous. God had seen him through so much, and miraculously brought Israel to rule over their own land again.

David knew where credit was due. It wasn’t his great leadership or military strategy that gave him his position or power, it was God. He feels like a hypocrite because actions speak louder than words. The action David sees as he looks out from his luxurious new cedar palace is God’s house, where the Ark of the Covenant is relegated to a tent, just as when Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt through the wilderness some 400 years earlier. In those 400 years Israel had morphed from a nomadic band of former slaves in the desert into the premiere economic and military power in the Middle East, with a wealthy, decorated warrior-king wrapped in splendor in His palace. And what does God have to show for His role in making all this happen? Well, the tent is really nice. I imagine David thinking to himself, “Is this any way for me to show thanks to God for everything He has done for me?” Yes, he was feeling guilty, embarrassed, even. The prophet Nathan can see it on his face.

Nathan really liked David. Nathan, God’s appointed prophet to Israel first spoke for God to King Saul, Israel’s first king. On this day, with young King David all grown up, David might have reminded an outside observer of Saul – tall, strapping, rugged good looks, an accomplished, decorated soldier. What Nathan liked about David were the differences.

Old King Saul was always so sure of himself. He disregarded God's instructions. He acted without remembering that while he may have the title of king, the only true King of Israel was Almighty Yahweh. He did not seek God's counsel before moving forward. David, on the other hand, who grew up a shepherd tending sheep was humble and remembered that he was under God. Saul would not have commented on the strangeness of living in a luxurious palace while God's house was out in a tent.

Yes, David's desire was good. Nathan was so sure it that he told David on the spot, without even praying for it or seeking God's direction to go ahead. Build it David, God is with you. Saul was a military man used to getting his way, even before he was king – David was a shepherd, a young boy who no one expected to do great things and didn't think of Himself first. Nathan liked that David was acting in humility. Old King Saul, he did the opposite – he tried to take power that didn't belong to him – from the priests, from God. He was prideful, arrogant, boastful and always suspicious of people trying to take away what he considered "his." David was humble and wanted only to honor God. Can't you imagine Nathan thinking, "Certainly, God would be pleased with David's plan to give God the honor He is due." After all, that's a sentiment we can all understand. Honoring God is the right thing to do. It may even be our motivation to do things like attend worship, support God's work with our time and financial resources and so on. Yes, Nathan really liked David – and especially liked His plans to do the right thing and honor God above all things.

Yahweh – God – had been quite busy on behalf of Israel. Ever since he made a promise to Abraham, His hand was at work doing important things for His people. He had brought them to the promised land of Israel. He made them victorious over their enemies – which would not have been possible without His direct intervention. And now, He had given David success as Israel's king. It was appropriate that David was thankful to Him. It was appropriate that Nathan wanted to do what was right. What they did not understand were Yahweh's priorities.

Yahweh – God – was never like other gods. He still isn't. Other gods, they make demands. The Greeks and the Romans, while considering their gods quite powerful also found them petty, jealous, arrogant and sometimes even sadistic. They were susceptible to all the same foibles as people. If you've seen the movie Apocalypto, about the Mayan Empire, you see

portrayed a veritable conveyor belt of kidnapped tribes led to be sacrificed atop a Mayan temple to throngs of cheering people below in order to ask for disease to be taken away. Still other religions depict gods who are strangely dispassionate and uncaring, too important to be bothered with our earthly existence and lives, or gods who are so exacting in their rules as to leave no room for compassion, much less love, pity and a relationship with their creatures. For most people, the concept of any god is one where some supreme being sits in the lap of luxury dictating rules and being waited upon. This is a popular way of thinking of God. Do you know anyone who thinks of God this way? Have you ever thought of God this way? Some people, angry with God or the idea of God, extreme some describe Him as monstrous, God's clerics dangerous zealots, deluded by bribes of future glory in an afterlife and privileged status if you obey his repressive and arbitrary whims. Yes, such gods are self-serving. But Yahweh is different than other gods.

Yahweh's priority was not a temple for Himself. First things first, David. First things first, Nathan. After all, God reminds David that He has not dwelt in a house since the Israelites were brought out of Egypt – He went wherever His people were. With great fear and trembling, I now venture to paraphrase God – talking to David and Nathan, and also to you and me.

“I appreciate the sentiment but your priorities are messed up. Yes, I am your God and yes, you are to honor Me and worship Me and place Me above all things. Yes, I'm worthy of thanks and praise but I prioritize serving over being served. I prioritize the greatest becoming least. No, you will not build me a house, I will build you a house – and many generations from now, out of your house will come My Son who will Shepherd my people and who, while worthy of all thanks and praise will come to serve rather than be served.

People will always have their priorities mixed up. Some like David think I'll be honored if I get the most elaborate of something. The biggest worship space, the most skillful and beautiful music, the most money, the most cutting edge programs – because, after all, I deserve the best. Others, in the footsteps of Nathan think it's just the right thing to do. Go to church, pay your tithe and contribute to the building program, send the kids to Confirmation – because then I'll be impressed. It is true – you are to obey me, serve me and remember that all you have is really Mine, a gift for you to borrow for awhile. But not because I'm greedy. Because I'm your Father

and you're my children, and children obey their parents. In turn, parents look after their children and let them use their things. My priority isn't upon what you do giving thanks to me – **in here**. My priority is Me feeding and strengthening you in here so that you can go forward in My name – **out there**. I have given you what you have so that you can follow my priorities! My priority is that everyone would be under the care of the new, great Shepherd I send from the line of David! The Good Shepherd, who gave down His life for the sheep! You want to honor me? You want to do the right thing? Then rejoice in Jesus who I was born in Bethlehem and sent to the cross for you and share the Good News with everyone that He is Risen!

My Son Jesus sends you out into this world. I'm not here for you to give me the royal treatment, to fan me with palm fronds and dip clusters of grapes while I order room service on some exotic beach. I'm your Father – you're using my things. I'm God – I don't NEED what you have to give. YOU need what I have to give – and others need what I have to give. I give forgiveness. I give eternal life. I give whatever physical blessings you have – buildings, money, programs, staffing. It was all Mine to start with and it is to serve My purposes – use what I have given you to care for others who are starving for Jesus. Yes, I am here to serve you – My Son Jesus rules eternally as King from the house of David – the house that I built. Through Jesus, I adopt you as My own to live in My house. Let's remember the first things, first." In Jesus' name, Amen.