

DAVID AND MEPHIBOSHETH

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Lindley G. DeGarmo
Union Church of Pocantico Hills
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Psalm 133
II Samuel 9:1-13

I enjoy westerns. I grew up watching Roy Rogers and the Lone Ranger and Bonanza. Sarah and I spent one of our first dates talking about Larry McMurry's *Lonesome Dove*, which we both loved. I know I'm not alone in loving westerns. I understand that one of the most watched cable programs ever was a western called *Crossfire Trail*, based on Louis L'Amour's book.¹ It starred Tom Sellick. In the story, the hero travels hundreds of miles to keep his promise to his dying friend. The main "bad guy" in the film laments that his plans are being destroyed by the hero's arrival. He says, "What kind of dinosaur upends his whole life to keep his promise to a dying man?" As every lover of westerns knows, keeping promises creates heroes.

King David kept his promise to Jonathan.

In today's lesson, King David's life couldn't be better. Just crowned. His throne room smells like fresh paint, and his city architect is laying out new neighborhoods. God's ark—which David brought to Jerusalem in last week's lesson—is comfortably installed in the tabernacle; gold and silver overflow the king's coffers; Israel's enemies maintain their distance. David's days of ducking Saul are a distant memory. But then David remembers a promise he made to Jonathan. When Saul threatened to kill David, Saul's son Jonathan fought to save him. Jonathan succeeded and asked David to show loving kindness to him. If he died, Jonathan wanted David to show loving kindness to his family.²

Jonathan died. But David's promise did not.

To David, a covenant was no small matter. He knew remaining faithful to a promise can be every bit as challenging as facing a Goliath.

The wife of a depressed husband knows the challenge of a promise. As he daily stumbles through a gloomy fog, she wonders what happened to the confident young man she married. Can you keep a promise in a time like this?

The husband of a cheating wife asks the same. She's back. She's sorry. He's hurt. He wonders, "She broke her promise...Do I keep mine?"

Parents have asked such a question. Parents of addicts. Parents of runaways. Parents of the handicapped and disabled. Even parents of healthy toddlers have wondered how to keep a promise. Honeymoon moments and quiet evenings are buried beneath the mountain of dirty diapers and short nights.

Enter Mephibosheth. After the chaos of the civil war, finding a descendant of Jonathan wasn't easy. Advisers summoned Ziba, a former servant of Saul. Did he know of a surviving

¹ "Wholesomeness Wins on the Tube," *Studio Briefing—Film News*, August 20, 2007.

² 1 Samuel 20:14-15.

member of Saul's household? Take a good look at Ziba's answer: "Yes, one of Jonathan's sons is still alive, but he is crippled in both feet."³

Ziba mentions no name, just points out that the boy is lame. We sense a thinly veiled disclaimer in his words. "Be careful, David. He isn't—how would you say it?—suited for the palace. You might think twice about keeping this promise." Ziba gives no details about the boy, but the fourth chapter of 2 Samuel does. The person in question is the son of Jonathan, Mephibosheth. I don't make up these names!

When Mephibosheth was five years old, his father and grandfather died at the hands of the Philistines. Knowing their brutality, the family of Saul headed for the hills. Mephibosheth's nurse snatched him up and ran, then tripped and dropped the boy, breaking both his ankles, leaving him incurably lame. Escaping servants carried him across the Jordan River to an inhospitable village called Lo-debar. The name means "without pasture." Picture a tumbleweed-tossed, trailer park in an Arizona desert. Mephibosheth hid there, first for fear of the Philistines, then for fear of David. Victimized. Ostracized. Disabled. Uncultured.

"Are you sure?" Ziba's reply insinuates, "Are you sure you want the likes of this boy in your palace?"

David is sure.

So the king's men cross the river to Lo-debar to fetch Mephibosheth. He is brought into the palace and carried into the king's presence. No doubt, he fears the worst. He falls on his face and asks, "Who am I that you pay attention to a stray dog like me?" David cites his promise to Jonathan, and restores to Mephibosheth everything that belonged to Saul and his family and gives him a place in his palace and at his table.

Faster than you can say Mephibosheth twice, he gets promoted from Lo-debar to the king's table. Good-bye, obscurity. Hello, royalty and realty. Note: David could have sent money to Lo-debar. A lifelong annuity would have generously fulfilled his promise. But David gave Mephibosheth more than a pension; he gave him a place—a place at the royal table. The kid who had no legs to stand on suddenly has everything to live for. Why? Because he impressed David? Convinced David? Coerced David? No, Mephibosheth did nothing. A promise prompted David. The king is kind, not because the boy is deserving, but because the promise is enduring.

And it does endure. If we follow the life of Mephibosheth, he beds down in the palace and disappears from Scripture for fifteen years or so. He resurfaces amidst the drama of Absalom's rebellion. Absalom, you may remember, is David's rebellious curse of a son, who leads a rebellion and forces David to flee Jerusalem. Ziba—the servant of Saul who had told David where to find Mephibosheth—leaves with David. Ziba tells David that Mephibosheth sided with the enemy. After Absalom dies and David returns to Jerusalem, Mephibosheth gives David another version of the story. He says that Ziba left him behind. Who is telling the truth? We don't know because David never asked. Why? It doesn't matter. Mephibosheth's place in the palace depends, not on his behavior, but on David's promise.

Why? Why is David so loyal? And how? How is David so loyal? Mephibosheth brings nothing and takes much. From whence does David quarry such resolve? Were we able to ask

³ 2 Samuel 9:3.

David how he fulfilled his giant-of-a-promise, he would take us from his story to God's story. God sets the standard for covenant keeping.

As Moses told the Israelites: "Know this: God, your God, is God indeed, a God you can depend upon. He keeps his covenant of loyal love with those who love him and observe his commandments for a thousand generations."⁴

God makes and never breaks his promises. The Hebrew word for covenant, *beriyth*, means "a solemn agreement with binding force." God's irrevocable covenant runs like a scarlet thread through a tapestry of Scripture. Remember God's promise to Noah? Every rainbow reminds us of God's covenant. You know, astronauts who've seen rainbows from outer space tell us they form a complete circle. God's promises are equally unbroken and unending.⁵

Abraham can tell you about promises. God told this patriarch that counting the stars and counting his descendants would be equal challenges. To secure the oath, God had Abraham cut several animals in half. To seal a covenant in the Ancient East, the promise maker passed between a divided animal carcass, volunteering to meet the same fate if he broke his word.

God takes promises seriously and seals them dramatically. Consider the case of the prophet Hosea. Seven hundred years before the birth of Jesus, God commanded Hosea to marry a prostitute named Gomer. Hosea obeyed. Gomer gave birth to three children, none of whom were Hosea's. Gomer abandoned Hosea for a life the equivalent of a call girl at a strip club. Rock bottom came in the form of an auction pit, where men bid on her as a slave. Lesser men would have waved her off. Not Hosea. He jumped into the bidding and bought his wife and took her home again. Why? Here's Hosea's explanation: "God ordered me to buy her back as an example of the way God loves His people."⁶

Need a picture of our promise-keeping God? Look at Hosea buying back his wife. Look at the smoldering pot passing between the animals. Look at the rainbow. Or look at Mephibosheth. Or look in the mirror. Were you not born as a child of the King? Have you not been left hobbling because of the stumble of Adam and Eve? Who among us hasn't meandered along the dry sand of Lo-debar?

But then came the palace messenger. A fourth-grade teacher, a high school buddy, an aunt, a friend who went to church. They came with big news: "You are not going to believe this," they announced, "but the King of Israel has a place for you at the table. The place card is printed, and the chair is empty. He wants you in his family." Because of your IQ? Your retirement account? Your organizational skills? Your good works? Sorry. Your invitation to this table he has set for us has nothing to do with you and everything to do with God. Your place at the heavenly banquet is covenant caused, covenant secured, and covenant based. You can put Lo-debar in the rearview mirror for one reason—God keeps his promises.

I don't for a moment intend to minimize the challenges some of you face. You're tired. You're angry. You're disappointed. This isn't the marriage you expected or the life you wanted. But looming in your past is a promise you made. Now, there will be times, because we are human, when you may not be able to keep that promise. No one should feel bound to an abusive

⁴ Deuteronomy 7:9, *The Message*.

⁵ Fred Lowery, *Covenant Marriage* (West Monroe, LA: Howard Publishing, 2002), 44-45.

⁶ Hosea 3:1-2.

relationship, for example. And sometimes another person has broken faith so egregiously with a covenant the two of you have made, that there simply is no way to restore it.

But allowing for those exceptions, may I urge you to do all you can to keep your promise? To give it one more try? Why should you? So you can understand the depth of God's love.

When you love the unloving, you get a glimpse of what God does for you. When you keep the porch light on for the prodigal child, when you do what is right even though you have been done wrong, when you love the weak and the sick, you do what God does every single moment. Covenant keeping enrolls you in the postgraduate school of God's love. God wants you to illustrate his covenant-love. David did with Mephibosheth. David was a walking parable of God's loyalty. Hosea did the same with Gomer. He modeled divine devotion.

My mother illustrated covenant love with my stepfather. I remember watching her care for him in his final months. Hodgkin's Disease had sucked life from every muscle in his body. She did for him what mothers do for infants. She bathed and fed him, changed his diapers. He hated hospitals, and so she kept him in their bed at home and made him her mission. If she complained, I never heard it. If she frowned, I never saw it. What I heard and saw was a covenant keeper. "This is what love does," her actions announced as she powdered his body, shaved his face, and washed his sheets. She modeled the power of a promise kept.

God calls on you to do the same. Illustrate stubborn love. Incarnate fidelity. Show the world what real love does. And God promises to fill us with the power of the Holy Spirit, which will be with us every step of the way, giving us strength to meet every need and challenge.

To the Lord our God, Alpha and Omega, be all glory and honor forever. Amen.