

"The Cost of Giving"

1 Chronicles 21:1-22:1

Rev. David K. Wood, Ph.D.

Deer Creek United Presbyterian Church/Pleasant Unity United Presbyterian Church
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Our text this morning involves one of the most dramatic scenes in all the Bible. However we have to start by going back to the BEGINNING of the chapter which opens with a most curious sentence: "Satan stood up against Israel, and incited David to number Israel." In the verses that follow, we discover that David had committed an egregious sin by taking a census of his kingdom and registering everyone of military age. Now what could possibly be WRONG by conducting a census? After all, our nation undertakes one every ten years and none of us believes there is anything "satanic" about THAT. From a military viewpoint, it just makes sense that we or a warrior king like David must know how many young men and women are available in the event that a war should break out. Yet we are told in our text that David had greatly sinned in the eyes of the Lord.

The Bible shows us that Israel was originally a theocracy, a people governed by God through his prophets and judges. In times of war, it was GOD who led his people into battle, giving them many victories. However, in time, Israel grew tired of this arrangement and demanded they have a king "like all the other nations of the world." The prophet Samuel was horrified by this request because he viewed this, not as a rejection of his OWN leadership but rather a repudiation of GOD. Therefore, he sternly warned them: "You are abandoning God in favor of a man. In time this king would take your young men and women and all your goods and use them for his own purpose." But when the people remained insistent, God yielded and gave them the desires of their heart.

The sin David had committed was by issuing a call for a census, he wanted a precise accounting of his military and those of draft age for it was now his MILITIA rather than GOD that was becoming the source of his strength. It was viewed as an act of hubris and pride for it showed his reliance was gradually shifting from one of dependence upon the faithfulness of God to that of the superiority of Israel's weapons and the size of her army and the number of her draft recruits. Samuel's warning had now become a REALITY. How many times in our OWN day have we witnessed such pride at work and, more often than not, it has led to devastating results. During the 1930's, Germany had amassed an army and air force more than 10 times the size and strength of the U.S. and Britain and France and thus Hitler had no fear in attacking them and beginning World War II. And was it not the same act of hubris that led Russia to invade the Ukraine earlier this year. Putin believed that with his country's superior weaponry and larger forces, he could deploy troops and in a swift show of force, crush whatever opposition stood in their way; Ukraine would be his in only a matter of weeks! Today, however, Russian forces have been dealt one blow after another by a much smaller army using less developed weapons such that Russia's much vaunted army now finds itself in retreat.

Even our OWN nation has never been free of such hubris. In the mid-19th century, the Mexican-American War became a pretext for stealing Texas away from Mexico, thus enlarging our borders. The Spanish-American War, in which we gained the Philippines, was an excuse to

show off the strength of our growing navy and establish a base for our fleets in south-east Asia. Slightly more than a half-century ago, we ventured into Vietnam thinking that we could quickly defeat the Viet Cong by the sheer force of our superior might and sophisticated weaponry, that with our overwhelming power, we could "bomb them back to the stone age," as one general declared. It was unthinkable that such a small, poor, and ill-equipped army like the North Vietnamese could POSSIBLY thwart the mightiest nation on the face of the earth. Yes, the history of warfare has been the sin of David repeated again and again by political leaders under the arrogant assumption that WE and not God are the source of our own success.

Now every nation has the responsibility to provide for the safety and security of its citizens. Every year, over one third of our federal budget is devoted to national defense- for the procurement of armaments and to maintain instant readiness in the event of foreign attack. But not only nations but WE, as INDIVIDUALS, seek SIMILAR safety and security. As we grow older and approach retirement, as our health deteriorates and medical bills escalate, as taxes rise and utility rates skyrocket, we grow increasingly anxious about what the future may bring. If anything, this past week's election has underscored the concern most Americans have over the economy, how the high inflation rates have eroded our buying power to the extent that even paying for the most basic of goods such as gasoline and groceries have become a real struggle.

Now security is, of course, a legitimate concern- BUT ONLY UP TO A POINT. The problem is that our obsession with security can eventually become a source of grave INSECURITY. It can make us so fearful about events or other people or even of the future that it paralyzes our will. It can render us so distrustful of everyone and everything that it imprisons us within a world dominated by nervousness and fear. Our once vibrant and optimistic trust in God, our faith in other people- these are slowly sapped and displaced by an irrational reliance upon our bank accounts and interest rates. The fact is that when we're dominated by such fears, there is NEVER ENOUGH security, NEVER ENOUGH money to protect us.

Following the census, David is approached by the prophet Gad who informs him how angry God has become and that due to his pride and disobedience, he would now have be punished. Therefore, the king was given one of three options, ANY of which would lead to a devastating loss of life. Either he would give Israel another three years of famine, or three months of invasion by cruel enemy forces, or else three days of divine judgment. David's response was, "I am in great distress; let me fall into the hand of the Lord, for his mercy is very great; but let me not fall into the hand of man."

So the Lord sent disease upon his people and 70,000 perished. Then, just as the Angel of Death had his sword drawn ready to destroy Jerusalem and all its inhabitants, David and the elders donned sack cloth and ashes and threw themselves down to appeal for God's mercy. In anguish, David cried out, "Was it not I who gave command to number the people? It is I who have sinned and done very wickedly. But these sheep, what have they done? Let thy hand, I pray thee, O Lord my God, be against me and against my father's house; but let not the plague be upon thy people."

What this scene underscores is just how serious a violation of trust it was to move from security in God to a security of one's own hand and making. Israel's protection and prosperity had come from GOD ALONE and not themselves, and so long as they continued to trust in God and not in their militia and treasury, they would continue to prosper. But the moment their faith

turned to pride and their trust in God to trust in their OWN powers, then God would have no choice but to cast them off and end a thousand year relationship with his people- so GRIEVOUS was David's sin in God's sight.

At that instant, the angel, speaking through his prophet, commanded David to go to the threshing-floor of Ornan the Jebusite and set up an altar to God there. Immediately, the king hurried to that spot to do just as the Lord commanded. Nobody was more surprised by the arrival of the king than Ornan- a Jebusite and NOT EVEN A JEW, who had been threshing wheat with his sons. David requests that he give him the site of the threshing floor that he might build on it an altar to the Lord. However, he tells Ornan that he does not want it for nothing but is willing to compensate him full price for it that the plague may be averted from his people. But Ornan will hear none of it, insisting that David take it ALL- the threshing floor, the oxen, the wood, the wheat. "Take EVERYTHING!" he tells the king but the king responded, "No, I will buy it for the FULL price for I will not sacrifice unto the Lord that which has cost me nothing."

Can you now see just what an extraordinary account we have before us this morning. Where the chapter begins with an act that God considered to be a most serious breach of faith and trust by his servant David, it concludes with a generous act of faith and trust by one who WASN'T EVEN AN ISRAELITE. It is Ornan the Jebusite--a lowly and despised Gentile--who must teach DAVID what God REALLY wants from his people when he insists, "Take it; and let my lord the king do what seems good to him; see, I give the oxen for burnt offerings, and the threshing sledges for the wood, and the wheat for a cereal offering. I give it ALL! I give it ALL!" You see, the ONLY offering we can EVER give to God which God will GLADLY accept is nothing less than the pure and undefiled sacrifice of our own hearts and wills in the service of God alone.

For all his pride and disobedience, David has learned an important lesson which leads him to make this humble admission, "I will not sacrifice unto the Lord that which has cost me nothing." But by far, the GREATER offer was made by a humble and simple Gentile named Ornan with an utterly selfless gesture that would have cost him EVERYTHING. He seemed to understand that any religion which costs a person nothing is usually WORTH nothing. TRUE sacrifice involves laying down our lives, our time, our talents, our means on the line. Most people refuse to risk anything for the Lord and if you don't BELIEVE me, then consider that the average North American with all his or her affluence gives on an average only two to two and a half percent of their income to God or charity.

The story ends with David giving Ornan six hundred shekels of gold to purchase the site and build an altar to the Lord whereupon the Angel of Death puts his sword back in its sheath and withdraws. After the sacrifice was over, David then decrees, "This is to be the house of the Lord God, and this is to be an altar of whole-offering for Israel." In II Chronicles, we're told, "Then Solomon began to build the house of the Lord in Jerusalem on Mt. Moriah, where the Lord had appeared to David his father, at the place that David had appointed, on the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite."(3:1) Thus, upon that site which Ornan's threshing floor now sits turned out to be Mt. Moriah, the same spot where Abraham had offered his son Isaac to God so many years before as well as the same locale where Solomon, David's son, would eventually build his great temple.

That Ornan's threshing floor is located on Mt. Moriah, is not without significance. The story of Abraham ascending that mount for the purpose of sacrificing his only son was actually a TEST, not for the purpose of God learning something about ABRAHAM but for Abraham to learn something about HIMSELF. When you look at the entirety of his life, it seems it was one continuous exam after another- some which he passes with flying colors while others he flunks quite spectacularly. God tested him when he commanded him to leave his homeland, tested him when Pharaoh wanted his wife, Sarah, for himself, and then tested him again when God was threatening to destroy Sodom. He was tested by having to wait so many years before the birth of his son Isaac and then tested one MORE time when he thrust Hagar and Ishmael--his first-born son--out of his house and into the wilderness. Now he is given his ULTIMATE trial, his FINAL EXAM- to take the life of his "child of promise," to sacrifice "his SON, his ONLY son, the SON WHOM HE LOVES," and that becomes a test that goes to the very heart of his relationship WITH God. It will demonstrate whether Abraham can COMPLETELY trust God or not. And when he is finally PUT to the test, he passes with flying colors.

Interestingly enough, this is the very first time the word "love" appears in the Bible and ironically it is in connection with Abraham being asked to sacrifice his own son as an offering to God. What this tells us is that all TRUE offerings to God must be, first and foremost, AN ACT OF LOVE, that is, it must involve giving back to God from that which we love the most, otherwise it fails to be sacrificial. It must involve our heart so that what we do offer up to God springs forth willingly and joyously with the deepest sense of appreciation and gratitude. In fact, we might say that the act of giving is at its most basic level an act of WORSHIP for we are approaching God in the only way God CAN be approached- in an attitude of reverence and adoration.

If in the DISTANT PAST that threshing floor on Mt. Moriah served as the location where Isaac was instructed to sacrifice his son, it will be SOMETIME IN THE FUTURE that on that SAME spot Solomon--King David's son--would build his great Temple- the most beautiful shrine ever erected to the glory of God. And it is there, at that Temple, that Jews from all over the world would one day stream to offer up their OWN sacrifices before God. Solomon's Temple was designed to serve as a meeting place between God and humanity; it represented the ground of reconciliation between the two. Within its confines, the Holy of Holies was constructed with the Ark of the Covenant placed inside. It was also the place where the altar stood upon which all the offerings were to be made. Once a year, the High Priest entered the Holy of Holies carrying the blood of a sacrificed lamb in a ritual that ensured the forgiveness of Israel's sins for yet another year.

Of course THOSE sacrifices involving the slaughter of bulls and goats and doves, the blood of which was sprinkled upon the Mercy Seat, foreshadowed yet ANOTHER sacrifice- THIS one involving a lineal descendent of Abraham and Isaac, David and Solomon- Jesus Christ, the LAMB OF GOD who took away, not just the sin of Israel but the sin of the ENTIRE WORLD. In another age and on another stage, the GREATEST SACRIFICE IN THE HISTORY OF THE WORLD would take place and it would become the highest act of devotion and love ever demonstrated. As John wrote in his gospel, "God so loved the world that he sent his only-begotten Son..." and as he reiterated in his First Epistle, "This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins."

I'd like to close this morning's sermon by letting you in on a little secret. The Bible tells us that God is all-powerful and the maker of everything that exists. Thus, there is NOTHING either IN our world or ABOVE it that does not belong to him, that God, by virtue of having CREATED all things, is also their POSSESSOR. But this is a misnomer for there is yet one thing which God does NOT own or possess which God desires above everything else and he will go to ANY length in order to acquire it. This one thing is actually something WE have and the only way God could EVER get it from us is if we were to freely and willingly give it up to him. This one thing is not something God can use his great power to demand or force from us. The ONLY way God CAN get it from us is if he WINS it from us, that is, if he PERSUADES us to surrender it to him otherwise he can NEVER have it.

Now what do you think that one thing might be which God lacks and yet desires above all else, something only WE have and God doesn't, yet will go to the GREATEST lengths to acquire? Have you figured it out yet? Well it is nothing less than our HEART, our LOVE, our DEVOTION, our GRATITUDE. And how does God go about getting such a thing from us- he does it by appealing to OUR heart from out of his OWN heart. It seems that God can only RECEIVE our love when we willfully and freely surrender it to him in response to some GREATER love, and that love which ALONE can elicit our devotion is his offer of the gift of his son, Jesus Christ. Through him—who is “love incarnate”—God wins over OUR heart and he does so by incorporating us in what has been called the greatest love story of all time.

God loves us SO much that he sends his only-begotten Son Jesus into our broken world to save us from ourselves AND AT THE COST OF HIS OWN LIFE, THAT'S how. As we study and reflect upon his life and ministry, we find ourselves drawn by the depth of his love and utter selflessness- one who came as a servant on behalf of all persons. Eventually, we are led to believe that Jesus has for us the value of God, that through him we actually TOUCH God and that God himself is holy, pardoning Love. As we allow this person and his drama to fill more and more of our mind and our heart, we gradually develop the conviction that we've been gifted with the SUPREME gift, CHRIST HIMSELF. Out of gratitude for such a supreme gift of love, we cannot help BUT fall down before him and declare, “My Lord and My God!”

Friends, November is usually stewardship month where we find ourselves encouraged to become better managers over the things God has entrusted us with. I pray we ESPECIALLY consider our church as part of God's work and that we would unselfishly support it- with our monies as well as our energies. May we open wide our heart especially in light of that gift we have ALREADY received and all the more that STILL AWAITS us. This morning's text shows us the example of Ornan the Jebusite as a model of great faith- one whose open, spontaneous, and generous heart was the REAL sacrifice, one whose security was GOD and not his threshing floor. Ornan understood too well how everything he owned- his oxen, his grain, his equipment- all had come from God and belonged to God, and thus he was willing to surrender everything back to God and still more. Like ORNAN, may we never consider it too much of a sacrifice to give back to God WHAT ALREADY BELONGS to him. And like DAVID, may our vows SIMILARLY become, "I will not give unto the Lord that which hath cost me nothing!" Let us pray...

Dear Lord, teach us to be generous; teach us to serve you as you deserve; and teach us to give without always obsessing over WHAT something costs or what it may cost US. Some things in life you CAN'T count and the heart is one of them. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.