



FRIENDS IN HIGH PLACES

SERIES: THE DIARY OF AN OLD KING

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2 Samuel 16:15-17:23

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Brian Morgan

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The thing I love most about the Christmas season is not just rehearsing the announcement of the kingdom of God on earth, it is being captured by wonder at *how* that kingdom comes to earth, how God uses powerful politicians, people with massive egos, driven by greed and paranoia, as stage hands who set the scene for the real story, the birth of a Baby. I love the way God works in obscurity, out of sight of the movers and shakers but in full view of the humble of the earth. And at the precise moment in time, angels and beasts meet to contemplate, heaven and earth kiss, and kings and shepherds are drawn into an animal cloistered cave to be captured with awe and drenched with wonder. Angels sing, the grip of night grows limp, and each soul feels its worth. The cave in Bethlehem becomes womb to a mini-universe.

Yet we seldom allow this perspective to permeate our everyday world. Most of the time we feel overrun by the megalomaniacs of the world. We feel impotent to stand against the massive machinery whose iron-clad cogs seem to grind inexorably against all that is good. If we get in their way, they will crush our sinews and pulverize our bones into dust. So we live our lives, trapped in the tension. We love the true King in our hearts, but we find it difficult to serve him in cities ruled by tyrannical impostors. We wonder how will God restore the kingdom to its rightful heir.

At Christmas, we get one of those rare, behind the scenes looks at how heaven's rule permeates earth's dust. In our text from the David story today, we find just such a view in an account that gives shape to the Bethlehem story a thousand years later.¹ We left David and his followers trying to collect themselves after their demoralizing journey from Jerusalem to the desert, an exodus which ended in a barrage of stones raining upon their fragile psyches from the outraged Shimei. At the exiles' moment of arrival, fatigued after a long, hot journey, Absalom, refreshed and fortified, arrives at his destination in Jerusalem. Now with Ahithophel at his side we are made to feel the "threat radiating from this political heavyweight is now more acute than ever. This man knows that David must not be given any pause for breath."²

We take up the account in 2 Samuel 16.

I. Making A First Impression (16:15-19)

Then Absalom and all the people, the men of Israel, entered Jerusalem, and Ahithophel with him. Now it came about when Hushai the Archite, David's friend, came to Absalom, that Hushai said to Absalom, "Long live the king! Long live the king!" And Absalom said to Hushai, "Is this your loyalty to your friend? Why did you not go with your friend?" Then Hushai said to Absalom, "No! For whom the Lord has chosen, this people, and all the men of Israel, his will I be, and with him I will remain. And besides, whom should I serve? Should I not serve in the presence of his son? As I have served in your father's presence, so I will be in your presence." (NASB)

Fortunately for David, Hushai arrives on the scene in the nick of time and immediately goes to work as David's friend. Not waiting for Absalom to question his arrival, Hushai goes

on the attack in an effort to create a good first impression. His passionate cry to Absalom, "Long live the king. Long live the king!" is crafted with deliberate ambiguity to conceal his true loyalty. The king is not named, but the emphatic echo is enough for the vain Absalom, who hears Hushai's words as a transfer of allegiance to him. Stunned and surprised, Absalom questions Hushai as to why he broke loyalty with David and did not depart with his *friend*.

In reply, Hushai blurts out principles containing more truth than Absalom will every know, but the prince, flattered by the fine rhetoric, is blinded by a vanity that borders on blasphemy. "No!" Hushai states emphatically, "I am loyal"—loyal to the one (and only one) whom the Lord has chosen, and the one whom the people serve. It is this one he stands beside and shall remain beside. That short phrase, "the Lord has chosen," presses in on the text with such weight that we already know the outcome of this war council. Hushai then pushes a little further, attempting to bridge the chasm between father and son, as if there were no breach in their relationship. He strikes a deep emotional chord in Absalom's soul, saying: "Should I not serve in the presence (*face*) of the son as I served in the presence (*face*) of the father?" Hushai is trying to impress upon Absalom that he is exactly the same as before, and that Absalom can count on his loyalty. The fact of the matter is that he is the same, but he desires to be in the presence of the son to faithfully *save* the father. What Absalom hears is entirely different, however, and with but one taste of flattery he swallows the whole rhetorical meal prepared for him by Hushai.

Hushai's action is one of the great demonstrations of loyalty, indeed of everything embodied in the term friendship. This faithful brother deliberately places himself in harm's way, inside the enemy capital, to serve the purposes of the true king. Like a spy lying in wait, he must carry out his operations covertly, until the grand moment arrives when the kingdom is restored to his lord. If he is discovered he can expect no mercy; certain death will follow. That is a very difficult assignment, one that is fraught with danger, but that is what being a friend to the Messianic king is all about—and that is what the Lord asks many of his children to do.

The scene now moves to the war chamber, where Absalom asks his national council for guidance.

II. Ahithophel's War Plan (16:20-17:4)

(a) Seize the Harem! (16:20-23)

Then Absalom said to Ahithophel, "Give your advice. What shall we do?" And Ahithophel said to Absalom, "Go in to your father's concubines, whom he has left to keep the house; then all Israel will hear that you have made yourself odious to your father. The hands of all who are with you will also be strengthened." So they pitched a tent for Absalom on the roof, and Absalom went in to his father's concubines in the sight of all Israel. And the advice of Ahithophel, which he gave in those days, was as if one inquired of the word of God; so

was all the advice of Ahithophel regarded by both David and Absalom.

Absalom addresses the group of elders, using the plural, but he is speaking directly to Ahithophel. He is the one who gives all the advice, while the rest of the elders of Israel fade into the background. He is very pragmatic. Without courtly rhetoric, he sets out the naked truth, suggesting an outrageous deed: Absalom must seize David's harem without hesitation. Fokkelman writes that by doing this, "Absalom can now penetrate the most intimate part of David's life, the part where he himself was formed, the area of eroticism, fertility, procreation, etc. Although David is absent, Absalom has the opportunity of... 'uncovering his father's nakedness.' His sexual penetration of the women is a penetration of the father's psyche, an irreversible act of the utmost provocation, comparable even to rape."³

Ahithophel knows the consequences of such counsel: it will cause a stench in his father's nostrils. There will be no possibility of turning back. The die will be cast; the relationship between father and son will be completely severed. Absalom's act would have this effect—"a state act equivalent to a declaration that the previous king is dead" (Budde). Once Israel witnesses the deed, their hands will be strengthened to follow Absalom. Such advice so appeals to Absalom's powerful lusts he wastes no time. Courting no further counsel, he plunges headlong into the act. And so the very roof from which David had spied Bathsheba, and where illicit desire overpowered him, becomes the place where a tent is pitched for Absalom. But this time the act is done in the light of day, when, in a calculated insult to his father, in the sight of all Israel, Absalom forces each of David's ten concubines. What Nathan had prophesied, "I (the Lord) will take your wives...and give them to your neighbor" (2 Sam 12:11) has now come to pass.

We are aghast as such a sordid act. How could such shameful advice be followed? To this, the narrator is quick to relate the high regard in which Ahithophel's advice was held in that day. It carried the same weight as if one inquired of the word of God. Ahithophel relies on his overpowering reputation to carry out his wicked scheme. His advice may also be the result of his own heated rage against David, since he was the grandfather of Bathsheba.

Following the forcible takeover of David's harem, Ahithophel offers the second phase of his war strategy.

(b) Strike While the Iron is Hot! (17:1-4)

Furthermore, Ahithophel said to Absalom, "Please let me choose 12,000 men that I may arise and pursue David tonight. And I will come upon him while he is weary and exhausted (weak-handed) and will terrify him so that all the people who are with him will flee. Then I will strike down the king alone, and I will bring back all the people to you. The return of everyone depends on the man you seek; then all the people shall be at peace." So the plan was good in the eyes of Absalom and of all the elders of Israel.

Ahithophel knows David from long years of close collaboration. He knows that David is traveling with women and children, that he is weary and that he cannot travel quickly. He therefore plans to strike while the iron is hot, and eliminate David in a sudden night attack, while all Israel has strengthened their hands, and David is weak-handed. The plan places Ahithophel in the limelight, with 12,000 men gathered around him. Fokkelman writes that such a number was not only enough to ensure victory but to implicate "all the tribes in David's destruction, so that they become politically and morally jointly responsible...for the execution of the coup, and hence even more strongly joined to the new re-

gime."⁴ Ahithophel's plan carries minimum risk for Absalom, and risks but little bloodshed for Israel. He intends to play a cat and mouse game until the king is discovered, at which time all the people will slip away from David. They will be offered a pardon, he will kill only the king, and all the land will enjoy peace. "Here speaks a sober politician, nay a wise statesman...no rhetoric, no flattery, not one flourish from the courtly style."⁵

As Ahithophel unfolds his evil plan, everyone in the war council is swayed by the force of his argument, which wins unanimous approval. Hushai has his work cut out for him. Not only does he have to refute such powerful advice and turn the majority opinion around but, as he was kept out of the war room, he must refute Ahithophel's counsel without the luxury of having the time to prepare an alternative plan.

III. Hushai's War Plan (17:5-14)

(a) The Refutation of Ahithophel's Plan (17:5-10)

Then Absalom said, "Now call Hushai the Archite also, and let us hear what he has to say." When Hushai had come to Absalom, Absalom said to him, "Ahithophel has spoken thus. Shall we carry out his plan? If not, you speak." So Hushai said to Absalom, "This time the advice that Ahithophel has given is not good." Moreover, Hushai said, "You know your father and his men, that they are mighty men and they are fierce, like a bear robbed of her cubs in the field. And your father is an expert in warfare, and will not spend the night with the people. Behold, he has now hidden himself in one of the caves or in another place; and it will be when he falls on them at the first attack, that whoever hears it will say, 'There has been a slaughter among the people who follow Absalom.' And even the one who is valiant, whose heart is like the heart of a lion, will completely lose heart; for all Israel knows that your father is a mighty man and those who are with him are valiant men."

Thinking on his feet, Hushai wastes no time going on the attack. "This time," he says (in contrast to every other time), "the advice of Ahithophel is *not good*." What a tremendous opening this is. Hushai begins with calculated deference to Ahithophel, but then makes his rebuttal by appealing to what Absalom and everyone else intimately *knows* about David. From his reservoir of memory he draws out an arsenal of images from David's past to paint a portrait of the king in all his former glory. The images of a *bear* robbed of her cubs, the *heart of a lion*, a *fugitive lying in ambush* in secluded caves, and the incomparable *skill of warfare* are all designed to transport Absalom into the shoes of Saul, whose grave still spoke of just how impotent a commander-in-chief can be when opposing David. Hushai is quick to add that David is no fool. He would lure Absalom into an ambush, striking first blood. When that happened, rumor would travel with shock waves, confirming what Absalom and the people already knew—that David was a mighty man, as were those who were with him. The people would melt at the news and Absalom would lose the kingdom.

There is a better way, says Hushai, one that minimizes the risk for Israel and maximizes the glory for Absalom.

(b) Inflated Dreams of Glory (17:11-13)

"But I counsel that all Israel be surely gathered to you, from Dan even to Beersheba, as the sand that is by the sea in abundance, and that you personally go into battle. So we shall come to him in one of the places where he can be found, and we will fall on him as the dew falls on the ground; and of him and of all the men who are with him, not even one will be left. And if he withdraws into a

city, then all Israel shall bring ropes to that city, and we will drag it into the valley until not even a small stone is found there."

In Ahithophel's plan, he himself would be the one on center stage receiving the glory. In Hushai's plan, however, Absalom would play that role. He is placed at the center of the entire nation. Everyone in Israel, from the northern and southern boundaries of the land ("Dan to Beersheba"), all the way to the coastline ("the sand by the sea") would flock to him. Then they would search out David and fall on him, like the dew which falls "silently, gradually and inimitably."⁶ And if David retreated into a city, they would drag the city into a wadi, where its forceful waters would wash away every trace of it. "The picture...is one of megalomania: to drag a city with ropes is half a metaphor for catching David, half a metonymy referring to the arsenal of engines of war used to hammer a besieged city, breach, and finally demolish the defensive works...While Ahithophel's plan does not expose Absalom to the dangers of war, Hushai flatteringly suggests in v.11d that the mighty army of 11bc will be inspired only by the personal presence of the leader."⁷ This is a participation that will cost Absalom his life. Hushai's speech is a "masterpiece or oriental eloquence" (Hertzberg).

Imagine Ahithophel hearing all this in the war council. Before Hushai has even finished, he has undoubtedly torn Ahithophel's counsel to shreds with his cool and sharp intellect; there is no rebuttal. Hushai's counsel so appeals to Absalom's massive ego that Ahithophel's advice is overturned in an instant. Brueggemann wryly notes: "Our own history tells us that war councils are not simply forums of reason but struggles between massive egos, partisan interests, and much fantasy. So it is here."⁸

But there is still another reason...

Then Absalom and all the men of Israel said, "The counsel of Hushai the Archite is better than the counsel of Ahithophel." For the Lord had ordained (literally: *commanded*) to thwart the good counsel of Ahithophel, in order that the Lord might bring calamity on Absalom. (17:14)

The Lord who heard that four-word prayer breathed out of David's soul in his desperation, "Foolishness, please, the counsel of Ahithophel, O Lord!" has now commanded to thwart the counsel of Ahithophel. The outcome has been predetermined.

IV. Two Destinies (17:15-23)

(a) David's Flight To Safety

It was not for nothing that David sent the priests and their sons back to Jerusalem. Just as soon as Hushai has completed his speech, the intricate espionage network is set in motion to inform David. The news travels from Hushai to the priests, who in turn inform an unnamed maid, who is able to pass through the city wall undetected to relay the information to the sons of the priests, Ahimaaz and Jonathan. But the intricate line of communication is discovered by an unnamed youth who spots the two young men. The lad runs to report to Absalom, while the two foxes take cover from the hunters. They quickly depart to a house in Bahurim where they are received and hidden in the recesses of a darkened well. "Holding their breath in the depth of the pit they can only hope that a nameless (!) woman can cope with the situation."⁹ The woman places a cover over the well, spreads grain over it, then sends Absalom's servants off in the wrong direction. When the coast is clear, the messengers rise up out of the well (a symbol of David's survival) and carry their report to David. He quickly heeds their counsel and safely crosses the Jor-

dan, where he is greeted by the fresh rays of the morning sky, tinged with the flames of dawn.

The scene is replete with images which convey a reversal of David's fortunes. Bahurim, the place which frames the story, once the site of Shimei's spitting hate and abusive stones, now becomes a place of warm reception, providing a secluded shelter of protection. Memories of the Joshua story and the crossing of the Jordan, which seemed to be unraveling in David's shameful departure from Jerusalem, now reappear as symbols of salvation. The nameless woman is a reminder of Rahab, who hid the spies and lied on their behalf, and foreshadows David's success. The king has now safely crossed the Jordan and stands "in the light of the laughing sun."¹⁰

In Jerusalem, Ahithophel succumbs to a far different fate.

(b) Ahithophel's Suicide

Now when Ahithophel saw that his counsel was not followed, he saddled his donkey and arose and went to his home, to his city, and set his house in order, and strangled himself; thus he died and was buried in the grave of his father. (17:23)

David's crossing the Jordan to safety spells disaster for Absalom—and Ahithophel knows it. The cold calculator is buried by a wrenching resignation. Without hesitation, he methodically saddles his ass, goes to his home, sets his house in order, and strangles himself, ending his life in ignoble suicide. He risked everything by defecting from David, and in a moment lost everything. The lesson is clear: no matter how powerful a politician or how weighty a counselor rises against David, it is suicide to oppose him, for he is chosen of the Lord. The once honorable counselor ends his life as ignominiously as Saul, and becomes the forerunner of the despicable Judas.

V. Reflections

As I reflect on this story, I am awestruck by the intricate web of events that turned the fortunes of the exiled David. A friend, making a timely appearance inside the highest government chambers, utters a masterpiece of Eastern eloquence, which he has to invent in a moment, and succeeds in overthrowing the counsel of the highest ranking advisor in the kingdom. And what of the delicate line of communication which must travel the dangerous highway to the wilderness, changing hands from counselor to priest to servant to runners, all undetected? The odds against this thin thread remaining intact seem insurmountable. How amazing, to think that when the sly foxes have been spotted and they are forced to sink into a deep well for cover, the fate of the entire mission rests in the hands of a nameless woman who must act with the initiative and courage of a seasoned spy or David's fortunes will lie buried in the darkness!

How did it all work out? Was it friendship, loyalty, daring, human initiative, courage, a little luck? Yes, all of these. But what the narrator really wants us to see is the thing David is not privileged to see: "*The Lord commanded it.*" The Lord in heaven heard David pray as he was ascending the Mount of Olives: "Foolishness, please, the counsel of Ahithophel, O Lord!" A short, spontaneous prayer (only four words in Hebrew), but once it was spoken, heaven stopped, Deity stooped to listen, edicts were decreed, and events set in motion to change the course of politics, kings, and history. This is the amazing way that God works. With but the four words of a desperate prayer, the fortunes of an exiled king are restored.

I cannot enter the Christmas season without thinking of how my fortunes as a parent were instantly reversed with but a one-sentence prayer. It was exactly twenty years ago this month, on December 4th, 1976, when Emily and I got the

news from Stanford Hospital that our newborn daughter had died, that I said, "We're not going to put away the baby furniture. Let's pray for a baby." The next day an unnamed woman, hearing about our plight at church, prayed, "Dear Lord, give them a baby by Christmas." Another unnamed young woman was in church that evening. Her roommate was due to deliver a baby the next day, but she had not told her doctor (who had eighty people on a waiting list) that she was giving her baby up for adoption. The girl told her roommate about us, and the young woman said she wanted us to have her baby. Rebecca Noelle was born on December 18th, one week before Christmas. In appreciation to God for that amazing Christmas gift to us, a miracle child, I wrote this poem on my daughter's graduation from high school:

A Shout of Joy Comes in the Morning

Clothed in darkness,
Shrouded with pain,
My soul poured out like water,
Drenched by heaven's rain.

Was it not enough to journey to Moriah,
To leave our first born, days from his birth,
That he might reign above,
An angel not destined for earth?

But now death's dark shadow crushed my chest.
To steal again the light of day and with it, dreams,
And to stand before an empty crib, silence screams.
No daughter to place upon a breast.

Would our home never hear an infant's cry,
Or see a mother's gaze enfold a child
For whom she feeds,
Would I never ever be a dad on earth?

But God,
Bent the heavens and came down,
He heard the cry of this poor couple,
And considered our low estate.

And did He delay? Not even for a day!
Before Jessica found her place of rest,
He sent a messenger to pray,
"By Christmas Lord, and do not delay!"

With such strange inward stirrings
We knew, we knew a baby was on the way.
And while we waited expecting you,
He turned our darkness into day.

He bent the heavens and came down,
He rode upon a cherub and flew,
He sped upon the wings of wind.
Oh, how my anticipation grew.

This is Rebecca Noelle,
Heaven's gift, Christmas JOY,
First carried, then caressed,
At last one to be laid upon breast.

A gift of grace from God alone,
Who delights to repair a broken heart,
By breaking in from without,
A New Creation to impart.

O Rebecca, will I ever forget that Day,
When I learned what it means to pray,
And see Him touch our lives,
And turn our darkness into day.

And from that day
The void that grew,
That gaping ache,
He has filled with you.

Your vivacious smile,
Your spirit bold,
Unthwarted, undaunted
Living life in ways untold,

To shatter walls,
Fearing no place and no one,
But gathering all,
Priceless.

What you have been to me,
From those dark days,
So long ago yet so near,
Words cannot tell, except to say,

*"Tears may come to stay the night,
But a shout of joy comes in the morning."*

You have brought me more joy,
Laughter,
And song,
Than ten sons.

How can I ever forget memories
Etched upon the heart, playing ball,
Being a dad, a coach, a friend,
Even a Swiss comedian.

But what I'll miss the most,
Is that sweet sweet angelic voice,
Which lighted among us,
Unashamed to sing and praise.

And now Rebecca, leave our nest,
Take off and fly amidst the clouds,
Touch the sky, see His face,
But most of all, feel His grace.

But as you leave, glance back, and know
That though we shall never be the same,
It will be enough for me, your Dad,
If you take thought from whence you came.

Yes, these were the days
When words of the Ancients came true,
He bent the heavens and came down,
And dried our tears with you.

1. I have depended heavily on J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel*, vol. 1, *King David* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1981) for many of my insights into this scene.

2. Fokkelman, *King David*, 204.

3. Fokkelman, *King David*, 209.

4. Fokkelman, *King David*, 212.

5. Fokkelman, *King David*, 213-214.

6. Fokkelman, *King David*, 218.

7. Fokkelman, *King David*, 219.

8. Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel, Interpretation* (Louisville: John Knox, 1990), 312.

9. Fokkelman, *King David*, 229.

10. Fokkelman, *King David*, 228.

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