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Providence Presbyterian Church
December 24, 2023
2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16 - Second Sunday in Advent

We are coming up on seven years in our house, the first house that we have owned. I counted seven other apartments, houses, or manses that we had lived in in the first 14 years of our marriage. Some of those were short stints right after we were married, moving to the Hudson Valley where rentals were not easy to find and were quite pricey for our budget at the time. But then our stays grew longer, a couple places being four and four and a half years. I was less prone to store the moving boxes, worrying that as soon as we threw them out we would need them again. There was something comforting when we turned the key on our house the day after closing, a sense that it was our place, our yard to do whatever we wanted, my garage and work space, etc.

King David's rule represents a sort of settling down and settling in phase for Israel. When the Lord brought Israel out of slavery in Egypt it was with the promise of being a people dear to the Lord, of being brought to a land flowing with milk and honey, a people who could settle down with a home. After years of journeying through the wilderness, of years of establishing their place in a land occupied by other peoples, after years of trying to establish a unified identity and to navigate the superpowers who might be threatened by another actor on the scene, David's rule represents a high point in this journey. They are finally a *people* in the *land*. But they still lack one thing that other nations have. Their God does not have a temple.

Temples in the ancient world had incredible symbolic and unifying power. There weren't essential in order to have religious life. In fact, there were likely many informal places of worship, many smaller "high places" scattered about Israel. But a centralized temple in a capital city created a central point to which the people journeyed to, a centralized force in creating unity. It had representational power like the Capital Mall of DC with its monuments and museums and symbols of a representational government. The temple had the sense of primordial origins, a point of creation and blessing. Furthermore temples were always built in a place where God had shown up in the past and therefore likely to show up in the future. A temple and a palace, God and nation, it gave a sense of divine origins and authority to the actions of the king. For all these reasons, there was great political capital, great political motivation, behind David wanting to have a temple for the Lord.

It is all phrased very lyrically here, however. “Now when the king was settled in his house, and the Lord had given him rest from all his enemies around him, ² the king said to the prophet Nathan, ‘See now, I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent.’” David is established and stable, a king of a people settled in the land. But God is still in a camper, sort of speak. In a tent, a mobile worship set-up, meant for a people who are moving with the Lord across a landscape, a people who still store their moving boxes.

Nathan, the prophet, assumes that David has the Lord’s blessing and says, do what is in your heart because the Lord’s blessing is with you. He is probably not eager to oppose the King. But then the Lord speaks to Nathan. Just as we hear David’s speech to the king, now we hear the Lord’s speech. And the Lord says:

Are you the one to build me a house to live in? ⁶ I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle. ⁷ Wherever I have moved about among all the people of Israel, did I ever speak a word with any of the tribal leaders of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, “Why have you not built me a house of cedar?” The Lord is saying, I did not ask for this. So where is this coming from?

The bible expresses an ambivalence when it comes to both King and temple. These are the traditional cultural ways of being a nation and a people. When the people asked God for a king, God was resistant. And now that David, the King, wants a temple, we hear some resistance as well. Now I say ambivalence because despite the reticence, they do go with a king, and despite the reticence, David’s son Solomon will build a temple. But the reticence is largely because having a king and a temple makes you like other nations, gives you legitimacy, which is why the people wanted these things. But the Lord has always claimed to be different from other gods. This god has moved about with his people, going with and before them and blessing them wherever they go.

There is a theological distortion that may happen if they start to see God as stationary and dwelling in one place. What do you lose when you make God conform to the conventions and expectations of culture rather than letting God move in the ways God wants to move?

But in this exchange, God gives Nathan words to say back to King David. And in those words is a word play. God says, “Moreover the LORD declares to you that the LORD will make you a house.” In Hebrew the word for house is used in multiple ways, as illustrated in this passage. A house (bayit) can be a house, like yours and

mine, a house can refer to the King's palace, a house can refer to a temple, and a house can refer to a people, to one's relations and descendants. So David speaks of being in his house, his palace, and wants to build the Lord a house, a temple, and the Lord responds, I am going to make you a house, a people, descendants, an ongoing line of blessing. "Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever."

In the Isaiah readings that we attended to throughout Advent, we heard much about the destruction of this critical symbol and representation of God and the nation, and of its rebuilding. But one thing that remained true through all that change and trauma, through the people being displaced and dispersed, sent to Babylon and back, is that in a world where gods were thought to be tied to land, the Lord has always moved about with his people. The Lord has always been a God that goes with and goes after his people, tied to covenant, not bound to the boundaries of a land or a temple structure.

When we get to the Christmas story, we learn of this God who is still moving about and going after his people, concerned more with covenant and redemption than with land and temple. A God who is faithful to that promise to David, but free to fulfill it in ways that we might not expect.

In the Christmas readings we hear a lot about Joseph being of the house of David, emphasizing how this story is the unexpected continuance of this promise to King David, back at the height of the nation, when David was walking about on marble floors. But here God is moving in ways similar to David's beginnings, not the height of his rule, but back when God chose him as the youngest and the smallest to be his champion, to be his vessel.

When the angel Gabriel appears to Mary, we learn that God has chosen a new vessel, as young and unexpected as David was in his day, a new vessel who would be open and responsive and faithful to what God was doing. "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But we also see a God not bound to a particular location or bound to a physical house, but who is active and on the move. Mary will go from Galilee down to Bethlehem, and after the birth, all the way to Egypt and back. And the God who once blessed David on his marble floors, and Solomon with a proper temple in the capital city, is now born to a young girl on a stable's dirt floor.

And perhaps one reason God always works in unexpected ways and through unexpected characters is to mitigate against and to counterbalance our tendencies to put God in boxes, in paradigms, in houses. Just when we expect God to act in

certain ways and to be relegated to certain places, God starts doing something new to fulfill his plans and purposes.

And so, when the Angel Gabriel shows up to Mary and proclaims that you are going to give birth to the Messiah, God was still on the move, still working, and working through people who were open enough to not correct or direct God's actions, but rather would respond with awe, amazement, worship, and a willingness to participate. That's why it has to happen on the outskirts, with unlikely witnesses such as shepherds, and malleable followers, such as Mary.

And I think that is the invitation for us. We spend a lot of time these days bemoaning the state of our nation, bemoaning the state of the church. But while nations and institutions, temples and churches, these structures may wax and wane, the Lord has always moved about with his people, always worked to renew his covenant relationship with people, always worked through those who are open and malleable, has always worked with those who respond with awe, amazement, worship, and a willingness to participate.

On this Christmas Eve day, as we sit between anticipation and the realization of God coming into the world through the Christ-child, may we be struck with awe, that God is here and among us. The God of the universe has visited, not bound to buildings or institutions, but at work to restore and renew his covenant with the House of David, which has come to mean all people, a house that spans blood-line and race, geography and political boundaries. God is still present and still on the move. And may we respond as Mary does, with a sense of awe and openness. "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

And all God's children said...

2 Samuel 7: 1-11, 16

God's Covenant with David

(1 Chr 17:1-15)

⁷ Now when the king was settled in his house, and the LORD had given him rest from all his enemies around him, ² the king said to the prophet Nathan, “See now, I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent.” ³ Nathan said to the king, “Go, do all that you have in mind; for the LORD is with you.”

⁴ But that same night the word of the LORD came to Nathan: ⁵ Go and tell my servant David: Thus says the LORD: Are you the one to build me a house to live in? ⁶ I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle. ⁷ Wherever I have moved about among all the people of Israel, did I ever speak a word with any of the tribal leaders of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, “Why have you not built me a house of cedar?” ⁸ Now therefore thus you shall say to my servant David: Thus says the LORD of hosts: I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep to be prince over my people Israel; ⁹ and I have been with you wherever you went, and have cut off all your enemies from before you; and I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. ¹⁰ And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may live in their own place, and be disturbed no more; and evildoers shall afflict them no more, as formerly, ¹¹ from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel; and I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover the LORD declares to you that the LORD will make you a house.

¹⁶ Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever.

Luke 1: 26-38

The Birth of Jesus Foretold

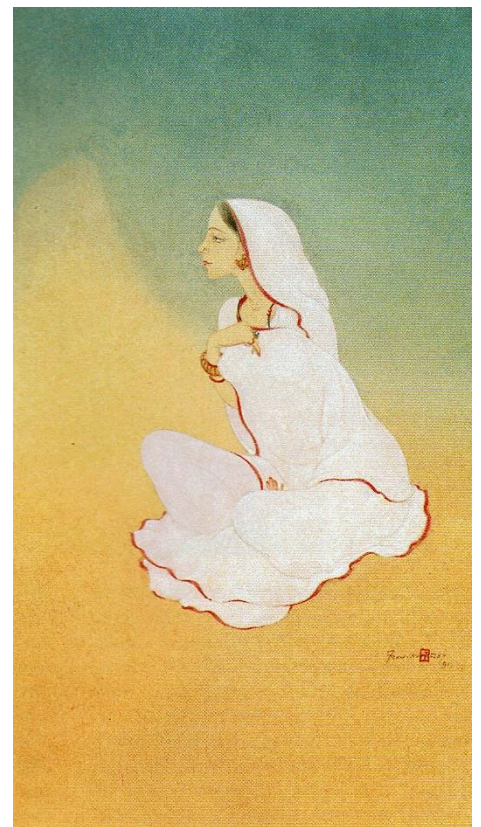
²⁶ In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷ to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ And he came to her and said, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” ²⁹ But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰ The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹ And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³² He will be great, and

will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. ³³ He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” ³⁴ Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” ³⁵ The angel said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. ³⁶ And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. ³⁷ For nothing will be impossible with God.” ³⁸ Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her.

Poem: “Gabriel’s Annunciation” by Jan Richardson

For a moment
I hesitated
on the threshold.
For the space
of a breath
I paused,
unwilling to disturb
her last ordinary moment,
knowing that the next step
would cleave her life:
that this day
would slice her story
in two,
dividing all the days before
from all the ones
to come.

The artists would later
depict the scene:
Mary dazzled
by the archangel,
her head bowed
in humble assent,
awed by the messenger
who condescended



Red Magnificat, Wesley,
Frank, 1923-2002

to leave paradise
to bestow such an honor
upon a woman, and mortal.

Yet I tell you
it was I who was dazzled,
I who found myself agape
when I came upon her—
reading, at the loom, in the kitchen,
I cannot now recall;
only that the woman before me—
blessed and full of grace
long before I called her so—
shimmered with how completely
she inhabited herself,
inhabited the space around her,
inhabited the moment
that hung between us.

I wanted to save her
from what I had been sent
to say.

Yet when the time came,
when I had stammered
the invitation
(history would not record
the sweat on my brow,
the pounding of my heart;
would not note
that I said
Do not be afraid
to myself as much as
to her)
it was she
who saved me—
her first deliverance—
her Let it be
not just declaration
to the Divine
but a word of solace,

of soothing,
of benediction

for the angel
in the doorway
who would hesitate
one last time—
just for the space
of a breath
torn from his chest—
before wrenching himself away
from her radiant consent,
her beautiful and
awful yes.