

“A House and a Promise”

from the pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania
by
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Readings: II Samuel 7:1-11, 16

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This is a story about great strength and power on the part of the Lord, Yahweh. It is also a story about defenseless vulnerability again, on the part of the Lord, Yahweh. God's strength and vulnerability are contrasted with King David's over-confidence and assumption that he knows as much as the Lord. David thinks he knows what God needs and what God wants but he is wrong on both counts. King David has made assumptions about God's priorities but, as we shall see, he is mistaken. What David considers important is not always what God considers important.

This strong God who is able to make covenants and deliver on them, and able to rescue a nation from oppression by its enemies is the same God who admits to being impatient, jealous and, yes, a dreamer. This is a God who is above and beyond complete understanding by humans, and yet, a God who will one day come close to the human family in the form of a vulnerable child in a manger. This is a God who cannot be contained in any house built with hands, but still, a God who

wants nothing more than a place in the heart and home of each of us. Like David, we sometimes misinterpret God's priorities, making assumptions based on what we would do if we were in God's position and, like King David, we often get it wrong. As we have said here before, God's economy is not the same as our economy. This God strengthens the weak and lifts up the poor and sends the rich empty away. What a strange way to rule a kingdom, we think to ourselves, as surely David did as well.

David has a fine, big house and he thinks God should have one too, so he offers to build God a house made of cedar. For years the people of Israel and Judah have been worshipping God in nothing more than a tent. Tents are inexpensive, travel well and require little upkeep. When it comes time to fix a leak, in a tent, the repair is fast and does not require a capital campaign, nor even a temple maintenance fund. God is satisfied. It is the people, personified in King David's plan, who have something more in mind. Soon enough God would have a house that required a huge investment of money and materials and human energy to build and maintain. Ah, for the good old days of exile, one is inclined to say, now that one is settled in a new land. Even David must have realized that there were advantages to the old days when things were simpler.

Still, David is a man who likes his comforts and enjoys a little status. The more permanent the temple the more impressed will be the community that is around it. People will surely say, "That is an impressive temple that they have built for the Lord. Surely they must be a blessed people and are favorable in God's sight. Maybe we should check it out." And so they did and the temple grew and the people felt secure.

The problem is that this is not what God really wants. God is not so insecure that God needs a large house, nor a house with the best interior finishes of gold and marble and cedar. God isn't even overly impressed with what goes on in the temple, as it turns out. Later we will hear God say, through prophets such as Amos and Micah: "I do not need your solemn assemblies or your sounding brass and splendid trumpets. What I want and what the world needs is not your posturing. What the world needs and what I want is for justice to roll down like streams of water and for every one of you to show mercy and justice toward friend and foe alike. You want to make me happy? Do that and I will be ecstatic over your faithfulness to my commandments."

In God's economy greatness apparently looks like a humble, powerless, dependent baby in a stable with a fifteen year old mother and a father who is confused by recent developments.

In God's economy sacrifice is expected and should be an unremarkable way of doing daily business: "Here, take mine, you need it more than I do. I'll make do with what I have."

In God's economy security is found not in a place called our house and home so much as in the faith that God is present wherever we are living and therefore we are never without a home. Our "place" is with God and God is often on the move having picked up his tent last night in order to journey on.

II

Now I know that few of us are ready to sell this (sanctuary), even in challenging fiscal times, and begin worshipping in a tent. Nor do we find it attractive to contemplate living like a desert traveler, calling a tent

our home. We need shelter against the storm; security that a solid place provides; a reasonable expectation that where we worship and where we live will be here next week and next year. But can we hold onto that expectation without making an idol of it? Can we still proclaim that our “place” is just a house and that our “home” is, and always will be, with God? If we can move in that direction then we will be moving in the direction God is calling us to go, however counterintuitive it may seem or opposite of what good future planning would call for.

One of the suggestions we used to get in seminary, in preaching class, was this: the professor said, “As you read this text, ask yourself how it makes you uncomfortable. Ask, ‘where is the rub? How does it offend?’” That was a helpful guideline to me and I still ask those questions of a text, especially one like this one from II Samuel that presents a built-in misunderstanding between God and the one to whom God is speaking.

The offense within this text, the place where it makes me uncomfortable is the possibility that my idea of home as a place of security is not really the notion of home that God lifts up for our consideration. My notion of how a house becomes a home is, more or less, a sentimental one compared to God’s notion. My discomfort may be expressed in a question, a rhetorical question: “Why can’t God just let us have our comforting, sentimental thoughts about ‘home for the holidays’ and leave it at that?” If Bing Crosby can say it while singing about where he will be for Christmas, why can’t God go along just this once?

It’s a rather silly argument to have, even just in my head, but it does express, nevertheless, a level of discomfort that we all share when we realize that *our economy* is often out of accord with *God’s economy*. We want to build up; God wants us to tear down. We want to live

forever, God reminds us that we are mortal and will someday cross over to another home, “a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.” We want a security of our own making; God insists that our only real security is found through exercising the faith that our only real security is with God. All of this takes a lot of believing and a lot of faith and a lot of trust. How much more attractive it appears to build our own house and call it home.

III

For years I have thought Marty and I would retire in Maine to a home there that we have owned and loved for over twenty years. We have had some wonderful summers on that property with friends and family. The winters can be rather cold and filled with deep drifts of snow but, hearty souls that we are, we were convinced that we could handle that with aplomb.

But then that perspective began to shift as we grew older and began to think about living out in the country as old-timers. Lately I’ve been wondering how many winters we can bear and how many years we will still go there in the summers. Until this fall these were not questions I was asking seriously in the here and now. But as circumstances change, I’m learning, our perspective on what is most important changes. It has been a challenging exercise, and an exercise in our own faith development. Our sense of place has been shaken and we are, for the first time in a long time, beginning to wonder if we have the faith it takes to live anywhere, perhaps some place closer to the kids out west, or in a community entirely different from one among a few acres along the coast of New England.

I know that many of you have gone through a similar exercise, while others among you still think of this as something your parents are facing but that you won't face for years. But let me tell you the best part of our discovery of the last few months: it is never too early to realize that God's idea of a promise (covenant, actually) and God's notion of what is home (not just a house) are always evolving, never static, never old and worn out, but ever new.

I think that this is, in part, what is meant by the Advent/Christmas declarations which tell of the new breaking into the old, and of new creation emerging out of old creation. No wonder God was so upset with King David for awhile: David was stuck in the old way of seeing and thinking, that David so young and virile and yet so naïve and lacking in vision, God's vision. *David actually believed that he could build a house that would be suitable for God indefinitely.* But God shivers David' timbers declaring that there is a new economy afoot and in this economy a house is merely a means to an end, not an end in itself. It nearly broke David's heart, for he thought he had a place that could contain God indefinitely, a temple build of cedar.

In similar manner I'm learning that my idea of home for the years ahead may be only a house to live in for awhile along the way. And that place may not always be where I think it will be today.

The promises of God, particularly the covenant in which God vows, "I will be your God and you will be my people, no matter what may happen in your life," is a promise we can put our trust in. God has taken the initiative with us, in truly glorious and magnificent ways. That is what the incarnation is all about. Now it is our turn to respond through faith, declaring that it is enough. We are satisfied. We are secure. We are home.

A long time ago a wonderful preacher named George Arthur Buttrick had retired from a New York City church and was, in the late 1950s and early 60s the Preacher to the University at Harvard. One Sunday, not long before Christmas he began a sermon with a question I would like to use to end this sermon. Dr. Buttrick began by saying, “As I was coming across the Harvard Yard the other day, I heard a student call out to another, **“Hey Bill, are you going home for Christmas?”** And then Dr. Buttrick said to his gathered flock, “Let us pray.”

Thanks be to God. Let us pray.