

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT | DECEMBER 20, 2020

2 SAMUEL 7:1-11, 16 | PSALM 89: 1-4, 19-26 | ROMANS 16:25-27 | LUKE 1:26-38

Sometimes the best ideas come to you when you least expect them. Unfortunately, that's when the worst ideas come to us, too. And it's the latter that's the subject of today's reading from 2 Samuel. This story begins as King David is consolidating his influence in Jerusalem. He is gaining political, social, and economic power. The ark of the covenant, the dwelling place of God, has been brought to the city. And David is settling into his own palatial digs.

The author tells us that David is hanging out at home taking a break from his political machinations and military strategizing when a thought occurs to him. If I live in this big house, shouldn't God live in a big house too? So he goes and asks for the prophet Nathan's advice. If I live in this big house, shouldn't God live in a big house, too? And Nathan says, "Go, do all that you have in mind; for the LORD is with you." Which is basically another way of saying, "Probably. Couldn't hurt."

It's hard to think of an object laden with more symbolic meaning a house. Houses are the symbol of the American dream. The white picket fence straight out of Levittown means you've Made It. Houses are how we pass on wealth to the next generation and how we create a sense of permanence. Our public policy is designed to encourage home-buying. There's even an entire TV channel devoted to houses, mostly watching other people buy them.

So it shouldn't shock us that David wants to build a house for God. But it's worth asking exactly why he does. One reason David wants to build God a house is that David thinks of God the way he thinks of himself. David likes nice things. David likes nice houses and nice wine and nice chariots and all the finest trappings of Iron Age living. And so David assumes that God must like them, too. David wouldn't like living in a tent, and so God probably wouldn't either. David makes God in his own image. At this moment, David's God is primarily a reflection of himself.

This is not just a Davidic problem. It's easy for us to think that God wants what we want. To imagine God as a slightly more wise and much more benevolent version of ourselves. Albert Schweitzer once said that learning about God was like looking down a well so deep that at some point you realize your just looking at your own reflection.

I've shared this story before, but it's one of my favorites. A couple of years ago our bishop got a call from some guy who was absolutely furious that his pastor chose readings for worship that morning to support her personal political agenda. And he's on the phone yelling and stuff. And so the bishop asked if he was mad about the sermon. And he said, "No. The sermon was fine. I'm mad about the readings." Turns out the inflammatory gospel passage the pastor had chosen was St. Matthew's Beatitudes. And she chose that passage because it was that Sunday's assigned lectionary reading.

The bishop likes to tell that story as an example of partisanship making church like difficult. But it's also an example of what happens when we make God in our own image. We expect God to just reflect back our pre-existing beliefs. If I don't want the persecuted to be blessed, God must not want them to be blessed, either. And if I want a nice house, God must want a nice house, too.

But there's another reason why David wants to build God a house. And this one is a little more self-serving. It's going to make David look good. David might think that he's doing a nice thing for God, but it's also a nice thing for David. Whenever people come to the temple to praise God, there will be a big plaque out front that says, "THE TEMPLE OF OUR LORD, BROUGHT TO YOU BY KING DAVID."

But there's a risk in this motivation, too. Up to this point, God has been moving with the people. God has led them out of slavery and through the wilderness. God has been on the go. In their shoes. On the way. But if you build a temple, it's going to make people think that they have God under their control. It's going to make God static. It's going to make God entirely immanent. God will be in the temple whenever you need something, but you don't have to worry about God interrupting your life.

ADVENT LUTHERAN CHURCH

777 WYCKOFF AVENUE | WYCKOFF, NJ 07481
(201) 891-1031 | ADVENTLUTHERANWYCKOFF.ORG

The irony of this is that it's basically how Pharaoh used the gods. The gods come out to tell me I'm right and that things are fine. And then they get put away. And if you read Jesus's critiques of what the temple eventually becomes, that it does more to prop up people's political careers and economic interests than promote the welfare and flourishing of God's people, this is basically what he's getting at.

This whole thing seems like a win-win for King David until God wakes up Nathan in the middle of the night. And God says, "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." Which is basically God's way of saying, "I don't know where you got this whole house idea, but it's not a very good one."

For one, God says, I'm not you. I don't want a house. "Did I ever speak a word with any of the tribal leaders of Israel... saying, 'Why have you not built me a house of cedar?'" God makes clear that what we want and what God wants aren't always the same thing. If I wanted a house, I would have asked for one. And moreover, God says something else. "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." In other words, God is not some object you can bring out and put away whenever you want. The Israelites are dependent on God, not the other way around. And with that, King David's infrastructure week comes to a halt.

But it turns out God does want something. And the thing God wants is why this story is an Advent reading. God declares, "The LORD declares to you that the LORD will make you a house. Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever." There's a funny play on "house" or *bayit* here. David wants a house with an open floor plan, white marble countertops, and an infinity pool. But God wants a different kind of house. The other thing *bayit* means: a people.

David's not going to build God a house. God's going to build David and David's descendants a house. Instead of living in some building you are going to build for me, God says, I am going to live in your people. And sure enough, as we heard in today's gospel reading, God does live among us in a radically new way.

What God wants is not a fancy house. God doesn't just want what we want. What God wants is to be near us. To go where we go. To walk where we walk. To live where we live. And to die like we die. All to make us live as God lives.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor