

“A Dwelling Place for God”
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Last week, we shared the story of the jubilant dancing David exhibited as he processed with the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem. We talked about how the Ark had traveled since the time of the Hebrews wandering in the wilderness for 40 years.

By the time we get to this lectionary passage, things are a bit more settled. David has established a monarchy. Enemies have been defeated. The Ark, which represents the presence or glory of God, no longer has to be a migrant, and neither do the people who follow it.

I remember during my teenage years, my mom and I moved a lot. We were always changing apartments, either a nicer apartment when my mom had a decently paying job, or cheaper housing or staying with friends or family for a few months when my mom was out of a job. I volunteered with Family Promise last Monday night, and as I spoke with the moms there I felt how easily my mom and I could have been in the same boat if we did not have friends and family as our backup housing plan. But once I got to college, thanks to scholarships that helped pay for my room and board, my housing was secure and I was no longer a housing migrant. It is remarkable how much personal growth I experienced once that basic need of stable housing was met. It was as if the waters stilled and I could finally look at the reflection of myself, and of who I was becoming, and see where God was trying to work in me.

For David and the people of Israel, settling down somewhere also gave them the chance to look more intentionally about who they were as a people, and how their identity connected to God. “See now, I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent,” David pointed out to the

prophet Nathan with concern. From this comment grew a dream that would be fulfilled by David's son Solomon: the building of the Jerusalem Temple, meant as a permanent space where the people could worship God. In the Temple would lie the Holy of Holies, the sacred space where the Ark of the Covenant would be held in permanent safekeeping.

I appreciate David's concern: "I have a house of cedar. But the seat of God wanders about in a tent!" David, in his respect for God, wants to make sure God is taken care of as much as his own household is taken care of. Many in this church are looking as well to take care of this church building, recognizing it is the place where people gather to meet God. If you ever use the women's bathroom, it must really be urgent, for you are placing your crouched body at the mercy of the sagging, brown ceiling that looks as if it might drop on you at any moment! As for the kitchen, not only does it not meet code, but water dripping through the light fixture is as dangerous as it is unattractive or inconvenient. The fact that we do not have an ADA handicapped accessible bathroom is inconsistent with our goals of being a fully welcoming congregation. I have heard some murmuring, "with these improvements, the kitchen will be nicer than my kitchen at home!"-- as if that is a bad thing. The Bible doesn't say much about toilets, but it has a lot to say about food. Some of the most important ministry, especially when Jesus was involved, centered around the sharing of food. So in the house where we come together to meet God, welcome others, and hope to be transformed by the word, tending to our kitchen, and even our bathrooms, makes a lot of sense to me.

However, through Nathan God tries to explain to David that God's sanctuary requires so much more than what a building can contain. "You think *you'll* make *me* a house?! Did I ever ask for a house when I moved about the tribal people of Israel? Did I need a house when I took you as a boy following sheep around to become prince over Israel? Did I need a house when I sent your enemies into defeat?" Echoes of God's rhetorical questions resound in Isaiah: "'Heaven is my throne,' says the Lord, 'and

earth is my footstool. Do you think I need a house to be at home? Have I not made everything you see? The whole universe is my abode! The only thing I want,' says the Lord, 'are people with humble and contrite hearts, people who observe my ways. In the presence of those people I will make my home.'"¹

Buildings don't endure forever. We know this. We know that in 40 years, we may have to redo those bathrooms and kitchen, or -- who knows?-- maybe our building project at that point will be to create a building that generates its own energy. Or maybe all the Protestant churches in Leonia will have merged and our building project will be to create architecture that reflects a piece of each faith tradition that makes up the whole of the body of Christ.

We know the Jerusalem Temple didn't last. It was destroyed during the time of Babylonian captivity, in 586 BCE, only to be rebuilt again in 516 BCE, only to be destroyed again by the Romans in 70 CE, around the time when Paul wrote his letter to the Ephesians.

In the 2 Samuel passage, *God* is actually the homemaker here, not David. And when God promises David a 'house' it is something much bigger than any structure made of cedar: this house is more like a covenant than a building, promising a kingdom, a name, and a steadfast love that endures forever.

In Ephesians, Paul busts open the physical notion of a Temple and instead conceptualizes a temple that is made up of those who were strangers and aliens, who are now known as saints. It is made up of people from far and near. It is made up of differing groups; circumcised and uncircumcised do not matter anymore, for Christ-- who is the cornerstone-- has broken down the dividing wall. Now, Paul says, we are built together in Christ as a spiritual dwelling place for God.

¹ Isaiah 66:1-2 paraphrase by Rachel Held Evans

There was an article last week about the kinds of foods found on the “USA” shelf in grocery stores around the world. You know what the most common products international groceries think represent America? Kellogg’s Pop Tarts and Marshmallow Fluff. Now was born in the USA and lived here all my life, and my parents did not feed me these things nor do I give them to my child, although she wants me to. What I love in American cuisine doesn’t fit in preserved packages on a shelf. No judgment from me if it’s your jam, but when I think of the foods that make me proud of this country, Pop Tarts and Fluff aren’t among them. I guess that’s how the Chinese feel when Americans eat “Chop Suey” and call it Chinese food.

See, when we rely on physical representations of things, rather than the heart of what they are, we also end up with shelves filled with junk that doesn’t sustain us. I am not saying we should not have a well maintained, safe, and inviting structure where we can gather, hear and be transformed by the Word. But it should also be the kind of space that would welcome who Brian McClaren calls “The Migrant Messiah.” Jesus said, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” Following the Migrant Messiah is having a faith that does not cage us, but moves us forward. Following the Migrant Messiah is being able to see Jesus’ face in the lives of other migrants, and to greet them with the sort of hospitality we would the Christ-- whether they are crossing our borders, learning to grasp the language of this country, or looking for affordable housing in our neighborhood.

So just as we work on tending our building, we must also not lose focus on tending the heart of who we are in response to God’s love. When our lives reflect that image, we become the dwelling place for God and God’s sanctuary extends far, far beyond walls. Amen.