

“Housing the Holy”

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What do you give to the one who has everything? Perhaps King David was musing over that question. Surely he had already given to God a number of gifts; as a shepherd boy; it's likely some of his very own flock became a burnt offering to God, offered up on the altar as a pleasing aroma into the heavens, and then used to feed those who worshipped God. David, as tradition tells us, composed a number of songs and poems, many of which we still recite or sing today from the Psalms-- a book in the bible of which the Reformer John Calvin said “there is no other book in which we are more perfectly taught the right manner of praising God.”

But David had already given these things, and with a heart full of overwhelming love for God's glory and abundant mercy-- remember, David had made some pretty awful choices in his family life-- David must have wondered what kind of gift he could give God that could really show God his full devotion and reciprocate the love God had shown him. Not only that; David wanted this offering shared from the whole kingdom he had come to rule. He paced around the royal palace as he tried to imagine what he might give, glancing outside to the flapping canopy of the Tabernacle-- the holy tent that carried the Ark, which contained the Covenant God had made with Israel; it was believed that God's *kabod* or glory rested upon that Ark of the Covenant. And then, he just knew.

He called the prophet Nathan into his chambers. “See, look! I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent! I will build a house for Adonai, my Lord.”

It is true. As the Hebrews wandered in the desert, the Ark came with them, holding the Ten Commandments and reminding them who and whose they were. The Ark crossed the Jordan river with them, and circled the city of Jericho seven times until the walls came tumbling down. The Ark was captured by the Philistines, causing a deep lament among God's people, who cried, “The glory has departed Israel!” But as the Philistines brought the Ark to its various cities, disaster fell upon each one. The Philistines practically begged Israel to take their Ark back, which Israel did with much rejoicing-- but over time, it was passed between tribal families until it was just about forgotten in the house of Abinadab. Finally, Saul remembered the Ark's power and wanted to put it to his own use by bringing it into battle against Israel's old enemy, the Philistines-- except, in his excitement for war, Saul forgot to care for the Ark completely, and the hands of chaos caught it once again. “Yes,” David thought, “let's build a house where God's glory can rest once and for all... that will be my gift, our gift.”

I've noticed that between my family of origin, and my spouse's family of origin, there are two different schools of gift-giving. Coming from my family, there is an art to gift giving. Looking for a gift to surprise your loved one is a way of spending time with them, with the goal of picking out something they can open and be surprised at just how well you know and love them. Of course,

if you open something and discover it to be something you really didn't want, you sort of expand your imagination to embrace the gift, for in doing so you are also embracing the gift-giver.

That's not how Chris's family worked. I was reminded of this a couple of weeks ago when I got a text message with a link for the exact thing Chris wanted. "It's Black Friday," she told me by text, "so you can get 25% off. I'd like it in either black or gray. You can surprise me." Funny thing is that I had already done my research and purchased the item, which she had vaguely mentioned wanting earlier. But on the Gajilan side of the family, they are very practical and want to leave nothing to chance; after all, there's no sense in wasting good money-- especially our own shared income-- on something the other person doesn't want!

Well, as it turns out, God never told David, "I want a house, a Temple, where I can permanently dwell with my people." In fact, it seems that God preferred being on the move, hanging out in a tent, going wherever Israel wandered. And so, God told David, "Haven't I been with you all this time? From the pastures with the sheep to the battles that made you a hero, I've been with you-- but did I ever ask for a house of cedar? No. Instead, I will make a house for you, and when you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me."

Now, it eventually turns out that David's son Solomon actually fulfills David's announcement of a house for God, a grand structure whose dimensions had amazing proportions. So, perhaps recognizing that the people needed this Temple more than God did, that's where God hung out for a while.

But the thing about a Temple is that it can be destroyed. And it was. But it can be rebuilt. And it was. But it can be destroyed again. God wanted to be with the people in an even nearer way.

And so, through an Angel, God sent a message to a girl named Mary. "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." Huh. Turns out God wasn't just hanging out in the Temple. Now, this might have been a scandal in Mary's time, since Mary was betrothed to Joseph, but had not yet married him-- presumably because she was still too young. Mary was perplexed by the Angel's arrival. She questioned his news, asking, "How can this be?" but ultimately, she consented to God's big plans to take up residence in her. "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

As most of you know, our church supports the mission of the Oelhaf House, a residence for survivors of relationship violence and their children. Some of the women who end up there have fled their homes in the middle of the night, out of fear for their safety or even their lives. Home has **not** been a refuge or place of peace for them. Through the Center for Hope and Safety, which provides the programming of Oelhaf House, they learn what it is to feel safe again. Not only that; they learn that their actual bodies are dwelling places for something wonderful and important. They come to know their own sacred worth, and to live more confidently into that truth as they rebuild their lives and eventually move on to a new home, and carry a sense of home within them that cannot be destroyed. If you would like to offer

something on their Christmas wish lists, you can show your support for the hard work they are doing to build up that sense of home again.

Similarly, our church supports women and children who are part of Family Promise, a shelter that in more normal times operates out of congregations throughout Bergen County. Normally, our church helps to host guests of this shelter over the Christmas holiday. Because of COVID, Family Promise is placing women and children in need of shelter in hotel rooms instead of congregations to keep them healthy and safe. If you'd like to support them through our Alternative Christmas Fair, your gift can help to make sure that there is in fact room at the inn-- and who knows, your act of hospitality may just help to offer a dwelling place for the holy, for we have seen that the God who has everything often shows up in the lives of those who have nothing.

As we can see from Mary, who 9 months from this Angel's announcement will push Jesus into the world with her blood and screams and salty tears, God's house doesn't need fancy. Not having our sanctuary is actually quite fitting for Advent. It drives home the message that God doesn't need a sanctuary. God needs you, me, God needs our human flesh to make a home. This time of Advent is the season of invitation. We are asked to consider if we can, like Mary, make room. If we can house the holy with our lives, our bodies, then in us and through us, God will make a great house.