

“A Holy Passport”

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Presbyterian Church in Leonia

2 Samuel 7:1-14a

Ephesians 2:11-22

There are a few of you in our church who came to Christianity later in life. You came because you were curious, or because you were interested in the cultural aspects of Christianity. Some of you came because you wanted to practice English. You came because you were looking for community, and these people at the Presbyterian Church seemed friendly, even if perhaps a bit odd. Or maybe you came because you felt a deep longing, and the Holy Spirit nudged you toward church as a way to discover how to connect your longing with God’s love. It is exciting to worship along someone who is just discovering, and maybe even falling in love with, the Christian faith.

Some of you may have had one or more of these reasons for coming to church. But most of our congregation grew up *belonging* to our church, or a church. You grew up feeling part of the Christian faith and while the denomination or building may have changed, you have always felt like a church insider.

There are perhaps more than a few of you in our church who come from another country besides the United States. Perhaps you moved here as a child, with your parents. Perhaps you came here for education and decided to stay. Maybe you found love here, and decided to build an American life with your partner. Maybe your work brought you here. Maybe your way of coming here was more complex, such as leaving a country due to political persecution, as we know some of our more recent members have experienced.

Some of you have an experience of immigrating to this country. Still, most of our congregants were born in the United States, maybe even New Jersey— probably not born in Leonia since we don’t have a hospital— but perhaps in Teaneck, Englewood, or Hackensack. You may have one or two or twelve generations removed from having immigrant relatives, but your birth certificates name the United States of America as your home.

Speaking of home, some who come to our church or are served by our church have had the experience of losing a home. You have had to change homes because your landlord decided to sell, or some kind of disastrous event destroyed your home. You lost your home because you could no longer afford the rent or mortgage. You left your home because it was no longer safe, because the person who lived with you, who was supposed to love you, chose instead to hurt you or hurt your children. Our church membership includes people who have become unhoused for various reasons at some point in their lives, and a big part of our outreach beyond church walls— including work with a nearby shelter for survivors of domestic violence, with Center for Food Action, and with Family Promise— provides care and support for people who are unhoused, or are at risk of losing their housing.

But most of our congregants live in a stable and safe home. You may have your unexpected household dramas or sometimes need to make major repairs. But at the end of the day, you always have a safe place to find warmth, and food, a shelter you call home where you lay your head and, hopefully, find peace.

If you have ever been an outsider— new to the faith, new to the country, newly unhoused, or any other situation that has made you feel outside the boundaries of who is accepted— this sermon may be a bit easier to understand for you than it will be for those who have been mostly insiders. If you have enjoyed the privilege of being an insider in most situations, you will be asked to stretch a little bit. But this is a sermon for *everyone*, and its message is one we all need to hear.

Paul addresses the uncircumcised in his letter to the Ephesians. And we may not assume he's not talking to *us* because 1) we aren't living in Ephesus and 2) — hopefully in this time and place— nobody addresses us based on the status of our genitals. But Paul is talking to all those who do *not* draw their ancestry back to the people of Israel, who were once ruled by David— that faithful and also flawed king whose story we have followed for much of the summer.

According to Paul, if you come to God but do not first come from a Jewish ancestry, then you come as “aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the

world.” In this sense, anyone who has not already come from the special covenant relationship God made with the descendents of Abraham are strangers, without hope, and without God.

But Paul doesn't leave us there. After naming our otherness, Paul— through the story of Jesus— widens the circle and makes us insiders, people with a holy passport into the citizenship Christ offers. In Christ, we have a home in God, and in us, God has a home too.

This was not the kind of dwelling place imagined by our predecessors in faith. Long, long before Paul preached a good word to the Ephesians, King David sat in the gleaming, cedar palace that had been built for him in Jerusalem and sighed. It occurred to him that while he enjoyed the comfort of a luxurious, cedar home, the glory of God was still *unhoused*: sheltering upon the ark, covered by a tent, rolling on a cart. God did not have an address, where people could always find God. For God, there was no place of permanent comfort and rest.

At first, Nathan agrees that David should do this thing. Build a house for God. But then, God replied to David— through the prophet Nathan:

Are *you* the one to build me a house to live in? 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.

Nathan— who held the job of prophet, a messenger from God to the king— at first blessed David's plan, which was to build a temple to house God. But then, God spoke to Nathan, and Nathan shared this message to David:

“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?'”

And then, God reminded David that it was only by God's hand that David had any authority.

“...I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep to be prince over my people Israel,

and / have been with you wherever you went and have cut off all your enemies from before you...”

God goes on to tell David, “You aren’t the one to build *me* a house. I will make *you* a house!”

Walter Brueggemann, a scholar of Hebrew Bible, notes, notes that “this oracle is built around a play on the word ‘house,’ which can mean either temple *or* dynasty. Roles are now reversed. David will not build Yahweh a house (temple), but Yahweh will build David a house (dynasty). The subject has been changed.

“In principle, a temple lives in tension with the ark. Whereas the ark articulates God’s freedom and mobility, the temple removes the danger and possibility that God might depart. ‘Cedar’ is a commodity kings like and value. The plushness of the proposed temple contradicts Yahweh’s self-understanding. Yahweh will not be bought off, controlled, or domesticated by such luxury. Yahweh has been a free God and will continue to be. The royal apparatus is not able to make Yahweh its patron.”¹

So, God will remain unhoused. David would not be the one to build the temple. True, David’s son Solomon did end up building the Jerusalem Temple. But eventually, that was destroyed. It was rebuilt again, but destroyed again. It doesn’t matter, because God’s point has already been made. God will stay on the move. God was never meant to stay in any one place. God is free. Still, in us, God makes a home. A temple. A citizenship. In Christ, there is no border wall. You don’t need a visa. We are given a holy passport. The mortgage has been paid. It is the belonging our faith gives, and it is not for one exclusive group. In Jesus, we are shown that this belonging is freely offered, for the world.

That’s good news for those of us who have been strangers, and long to belong. For those who live with a sense of division and brokenness, and long for connection. For those who have been unhoused or unsettled, and long to be at home.

But God’s dislocation, God’s choice to be unhoused, is good for us too. God chooses a kind of empathy for those who are also in a state of dislocation, for those of us who live on the outside.

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Interpretation Series: 1st and Second Samuel*

I remember that when I started to come out in college as gay, it was hard for me to think about stepping into this role which at the time, so many people around me apparently despised. At first, I only told a very small circle of very trusted people. I didn't even tell anyone in my family.

But then I studied for a semester in Beijing, China. In addition to learning a little bit about Chinese language and literature, I learned the more important lesson of being comfortable as an outsider. In China, every day was a lesson in courage as I navigated the streets and the subway, bargained in the shops, and ordered food in a language that was completely new to me. There was nothing about my physicality— not my height or my hair, not my skin or my eye color, not my style of clothes— that would allow me to just blend in. And so I had to take on a radical acceptance of my difference— and also trust that those in my host country would accept me in my awkward difference, too.

After that semester, when I came back to the United States, it was easier to step out in a spirit of trust as I came out to my friends, my family, the church. There were sometimes awkward edges. But more often than not, my trust that others would receive me in kindness was rewarded. And I found that I could be at home with myself, even in my strangeness.

From that experience of being a foreigner in a strange land, I have a very deep respect for those who come here from other countries— and I hope to show a kind of hospitality that makes them feel accepted and welcome as I once was. This hospitality is one thing I deeply admire about our church. And it is something that I know about God. In Jesus, God stepped into the boundaries of humanity, and stretched them out. Jesus showed us that we can be more loving than we imagined. More welcoming. God showed us how much our own bodies can be a home for a God who wants to be at home everywhere, in everyone. Jesus showed us how holy we can be.