

I will Make you a House

Hespeler, 18 July 2021 © Scott McAndless

2 Samuel 7:1-14, Psalm 89:20-37, Ephesians 2:11-22, Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

It just seemed obvious that that was what needed to happen. It was the necessary next step. For so much of their history, the people of Israel had lived an unsettled life. They had been displaced from here to there, first living as nomadic shepherds in the Levant, then taken away and made to live as slaves in a foreign land of Egypt, and then, even when they were released from Egypt, they ended up wandering around in the wilderness for forty years. So it only seemed right and sensible that, if they had a God who had chosen them and whom they had chosen, that such a God would not be tied down to one place either.

The Ark of the Covenant

And so the God that they encountered and came to know during those years was with them in many different locations. Being human, they still needed some way to focus their worship of such a God, and so, on God's instructions, they created something. They created a box, a beautiful box covered in gold. And on the top of that box they built a seat.

Oh, it was a very fancy seat. It was constructed out of golden cherubim, unearthly winged creatures, but that did not change what it was. It was a chair, a throne, and they believed that their God would sit upon that throne. They couldn't see God sitting there. God was invisible, and so insistent on not being seen that it was forbidden to make any image of God. But even if they couldn't see it, that throne was the sign and symbol of the presence of their God with them.

But actually, the most important feature of the golden box, which, for some reason, we have come to call an ark, was on its sides. On its sides were fixed golden rings. And those rings were there so that you could pass long poles through them in order to carry God's portable chair from place to place. Everything was designed for mobility. And whenever the box was put down in one place for a while, they would just pitch a tent to keep it in.

David Brings Stability

And that was how they knew their God. And that made sense to them. They were people without roots, so why did their God need any? And this continued to work for them even after they had entered into the Promised Land and began a more settled existence because, even then, leadership kept on shifting and changing and there always seemed to be some group or another coming along and invading or pillaging.

But when David established his kingdom and there was finally a period of relative peace and security, it seemed clear that it was time to make a change. So once David had established an administration and built a palace, the obvious next thing to do was to build a permanent residence for the God of Israel. In fact, this was so obvious that Nathan, the prophet and the man who never



hesitated to question or challenge the king's ideas, didn't even have to think about it. He just said, **"Go, do all that you have in mind; for the LORD is with you."**

Our Need for Buildings

And I think we can all understand that. When the Christian Church first emerged in the years following the death and resurrection of Jesus, it did not meet in what we would recognize as church buildings. They met in the homes of members, on factory floors and sometimes in open spaces on the edges of cities. The Letter to the Ephesians that we read from this morning was written to a group of churches that met in such places. They were an unsettled people – a people who lived mostly on the edges of society, so it kind of made sense that they would meet with their God in the many and varied places where they lived out their lives.

But something odd did happen to the church at some point. It didn't happen everywhere all at once, but as the decades and then the centuries went by, in various parts of the empire, the church did find a certain measure of stability. There were local officials who tolerated them, even liked to have them around, and they offered to the church a certain amount of protection. And no sooner did that sense of being settled come, than churches began to construct buildings as special houses where they could experience the presence of God. They felt exactly the same impulse that David had felt, and, like Nathan, they never really even questioned whether it was the right thing to do.

Suddenly Churches Everywhere!

And then in 313 AD, Emperor Constantine finally made Christianity legal everywhere and there was no turning back. All of a sudden, such worship houses were being constructed everywhere and each one made more beautiful and elaborate than the next. And so it went from there with every church of every kind deciding that, if they wanted to encounter God in the midst of their settled life, what they needed was a special house built for that purpose. And that story culminates, for us, with the arrival of Scottish settlers in this place and their decision to build this beautiful house to encounter God right here in Hespeler.

But should we Just Assume?

But all that time, like I said, everyone just assumed, like David and Nathan, that it was the right thing to do. We enjoyed living a somewhat settled life in a house, so surely God would appreciate that as well. But David and Nathan forgot something, something that I think we often forget too. They forgot to ask what God actually wanted.

But God told Nathan anyways. The message came that very night. It doesn't say whether Nathan was awake or asleep, but I've always imagined that it came in the form of a very troubling dream. But however it comes, God's opinion is made very clear. **"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. 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?'"**

God neither desires nor requires a house. This could not be made clearer. It doesn't matter that the situation of God's people has changed. It doesn't matter how settled and secured they may feel, God does not require permanent housing in order to relate to those people wherever they may be.

So that is the first part of God's answer. But I would note that it is not the whole answer. In fact, by the end of Nathan's vision, we learned that God will allow for the construction of a temple. This is because God recognizes that, while God doesn't need a temple, the people who are now living a more settled existence, just might.

Something Else Needed first

But there is something that must come first, and this is the stunning surprise that comes with Nathan's vision. You see, David has just said that he wants to make a house for God, but God turns that around and says instead that God wants to make a house for David. **"Moreover, the LORD declares to you that the LORD will make you a house. When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom."** David is interested in making a house of cedar, but God requires a house made of people, that is to say a dynasty, first.

What does that tell me? That tells me that God is much more interested in building up people than architecture. That tells me that God is much more likely to place God's glory in people than in a building made of wood or stone.

Picked up in the New Testament

And to show you that this is not just a one-time thing but rather an ongoing priority for God, let's make a quick visit over to our New Testament reading this morning. The Letter to the Ephesians was actually written to a group of churches in a large region, but it was a region that had a long and highly esteemed religious tradition. The temples in and around Ephesus were world famous for their beauty and the glory they brought to their gods. And so I can well imagine that the churches that received this letter felt rather self-conscious about their lack of a beautiful building in which they could meet with their God.

At that point in Christian history, having a church building was really just a pipe dream, but they must still have talked about it and longed to be able to make a house for God. But, in this letter, God writes back through the apostle to say there is something much more important than that they build a house. **"You are... members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling-place for God."**

It is lovely that you want to make me a house, God says to them, but first let me build you into a house. It is the same answer that David got through Nathan.

God is not into Buildings

So, what can we take from all of this? One thing seems quite clear. The God that we worship, the God that David knew and the God that we have come to know through Jesus, is not as much into churches and temples as we probably assumed that God was. God never much felt the need for such things, at least from God's own point of view.

Nevertheless, God does give in to David's suggestion of a temple, at least after a certain delay. There seems to be a recognition in this that, while God doesn't need buildings, sometimes we do. It seems to be helpful for us as human beings to have this place where we can gather and where God

seems more present, even though, of course, there is no place where God is any less present. There's also no question that buildings do sometimes create possibilities for ministry and outreach that would not be possible without them. So, God does recognize that they are useful to us.

God would Rather Make us a House

But, while God may accept our need for such buildings, there is a higher priority from God's point of view that we need to take into account. God would much rather make us a house than that we should make God a house. God is wildly enthusiastic about building us up as a community together, about creating us as a people who go out and have a positive impact on the community around us, about creating unity among us despite whatever differences we may have. God is much more interested in building that than in houses of cedar or of bricks and mortar. God is so insistent on that, that God would rather make us a house before we get around to making God a house.

Getting Christians Back in Buildings

There is a lot of focus right now on getting Christians back into church buildings. Of course, I can understand why that is. Many of us have been worshiping outside of them for a very long time now. I suspect there may even be some fear that if we don't get them all back soon, they may never want to come back. So I do understand the desire, but I am not sure that God is as desperate to get us back into buildings as we might be.

God Wants to Make *Us* a House

God never actually asked us to make God a house, though God did understand our desire to do so. But wherever we may be worshiping over the next while, do not forget what God's priority actually is. God wants to make *us* a house. And I do believe that God has been doing that even as we have been away from our buildings.

We have certainly learned some new ways to connect with each other in our worship during these times. I don't know about you, for example, but I found that some of the ways we've been able to connect through prayer during this season have been extraordinarily nourishing to me. I love that I am able to pray for the things that are on your hearts as we share requests in the zoom chat. This is one of the ways in which God has been building us in unity, making us a house. I certainly hope we don't lose what we have learned as we begin to transition to ways of worshiping that are more closely connected to a building.

We have also been able to connect with people who simply cannot come to a building, or at least cannot come so often. I pray that we don't lose that way in which God has been building us into a house either.

God's commitments are clear. They are commitments to us as a people. My prayer, especially over the next season, is that we don't become so obsessed with making a house where we meet with God, that we lose sight of God's commitment to us. God wants to make *us* a house.