

God's Dwelling on Earth

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[2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16](#), Luke 1:46b-55, Romans 16:25-27, [Luke 1:26-38](#)

One day Dave was just sitting around and shooting the breeze with his good buddy Nate. Dave, you see, had done pretty well for himself. He had built his own personal kingdom, had beat out many enemies and he was feeling pretty comfortable in his life. He had even recently built his own very nice house.

Dave had done so well not only because of his own initiative and strength, but also because he had had the support of a very powerful God named Yahweh. Yahweh was the God who had formed a very special relationship with the people of Israel but who had particularly chosen Dave as his special buddy. Thanks to God's support, Dave had been able to do so much and, if he now had rest from his enemies, it was all thanks to Yahweh.

Dave's Idea

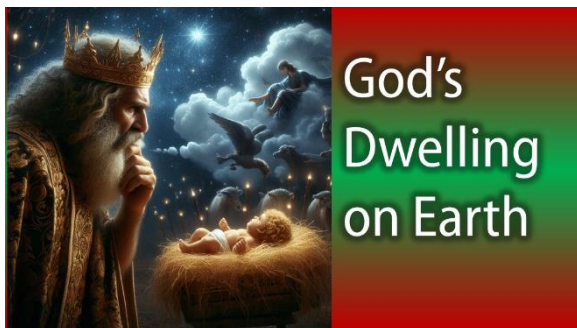
But there was one thing that was bothering him, and so he spoke to his best friend about it. **"See now,"** he said to Nate, **"I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent.** What I mean is that my God has been a great support to me but he's kind of wild and unpredictable. I mean, he lives in a tent, so he doesn't have to settle down anywhere. That means that he can change his mind and may even decide to pick a new favourite."

"Say no more!" Nate interrupted him. "I know exactly what you are thinking. You're looking for some way to persuade God to settle down and formalize his choice of you and your descendants.

"And, in fact, I understand how you mean to do it as well. You want to build a house for God to live in. You want to domesticate Yahweh and even establish an institution and priesthood to tell God what he can and cannot do. You know, I think you should **go, do all that you have in mind**, after all, is not Yahweh with you, and don't you want to make sure that things stay that way?"

Underlying Considerations

The Bible records that exchange between King David and the Prophet Nathan so briefly that you could be



forgiven for just skimming over it. The surface meaning seems clear. David is apparently just concerned with making sure that God has a temple that does him all due honour. But there are always some underlying considerations to such plans. You only have to read between the lines to realize that David might have some other motivations in his proposal.

And, in fact, that is just what Nathan realized as well. In the heat of the moment, when David first threw out the idea, Nathan just agreed that it would be a great thing to do. But it didn't take long. That very night, as Nathan reflected on David's idea, he came to see that it was more than a little bit problematic. And, what's more, Nathan realized that his sober second thinking wasn't just something that was happening in his own brain. It was a word from Yahweh.

God's Misgivings

God's misgivings about David's plans are expressed like this: **"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?'"**

The message is clear. Does God need a temple? Does God need some sort of religious institution and structure in order to be in a right relationship with God's people? Certainly not! God seems to prefer the life of living in a tent and being free to move around. But it is not just about God being a camper at heart. As with most things having to do with religion, this is all about control.

Human Institutions

Human beings love to create religious institutions. They build temples and churches and mosques. They write their books of theology and even their holy books with one goal in mind. They want to control God. They want to say who God can be and what God can do. I mean, look at so much of our religious thought and practice, it is often reduced to statements of what God "has to" do. "If I make this sacrifice, God has to make it rain." "If I confess, God has to forgive me." "If God inspires scriptures, they have to be literally true." "If I pray this particular prayer, God has to let me into heaven when I die."

I understand the impulse, of course. Who wants to live with the concept of a God who is completely capricious and wild and does totally unpredictable things? But God resists being limited or controlled by us. And

that is why, after some sober second thought, Nathan goes back to David with God's answer and that answer is no, you can't build a temple. But interestingly, at the same time, the answer is not no forever.

God Recognizes Our Need

God may not need temples and religious institutions in order to prove God's greatness and glory, but also seems to recognize our need for these things. And so, as an act of mercy and kindness, Nathan does inform David that his son, who will be somewhat less compromised by David's history of using violence and trickery to get his way, will be allowed to establish a temple in Jerusalem.

This is actually an indication of God's kindness and grace. As a concession to our weakness and limitations, God allows us to have a mediated relationship through a religious institution. You might even call it a sacrifice God makes on our behalf, sacrificing God's own freedom and choosing to relate to us within the bounds of a religion.

But surely this is a temporary compromise. God is still seeking a more fitting way to be present here on earth. But this is not the time to implement that alternative plan. And so, God puts something in place that will set up that better way. **"Moreover, Yahweh declares to you, David, that Yahweh will make you a house... Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever."**

The Strange Visitor

"How can this be?" the young woman wanted to know. After all, what the strange visitor had told her seemed like crazy talk. He had told her that she would have a son, which was impossible enough. But then he had gone on to say, **"He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."**

The connection between that incident in the Gospel of Luke and Nathan's answer to David is clear. Here, in this small house in the village of Nazareth, the conversation that started between David and Nathan so many centuries before was continuing. This wasn't just about the impossibility of Mary, a virgin, having a child. This wasn't just about the fulfillment of the promise of a house to King David. This was about God being present in this world outside of the limits of religious institutions.

“The Holy Spirit will come upon you,” the visitor continued, **“and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.”**

Holy cow, do you realize what this is saying? God, in some way that I’m not going to pretend to completely understand, is finding the ultimate way to enter into this world. Somehow, in Mary’s child, God is planning to enter into the human sphere. But God will do this in a way that sidesteps things like human-built temples, religious institutions and dogma. God is entering into our world in a way that does not require a priesthood or architecture or theologians to manage and control. By coming to us in a person, in Christ, God is maintaining the freedom to, well, to be God. And yet, because Christ comes as someone fully human, we are still able to relate to him as humans ourselves.

God’s Better Plan

You see, David came up with the plan all those centuries ago. It was a plan to try and limit God and tell God what to do. God said no, but did graciously continue to relate to the people of Israel through the religious institutions they eventually set up.

But in Jesus, God decided to do so much more. In Jesus, God decided to relate to human beings in a way that was not constrained by the walls of church or temple, by the judgments of a priesthood. God came to live among us as one of us.

And what do we see of God when he appears in Christ? When God is truly allowed to be God without human constraint here on earth? What we see is a God who reveals himself in love, and compassion and mercy and ultimately in sacrifice, giving himself utterly in death upon the cross.

David was afraid to allow God to be God, felt as if he had to keep God in a box. But in Mary’s child, God is set free to reveal a depth of love and grace that I suspect David could have only imagined. God is set free to reveal a love that is able to welcome all, no matter who they may be.

It kind of makes you wonder why David thought that he had to keep God under wraps. Kind of makes you wonder why we continue to think that we should try and tell God what God can do and be today as well.