

## HABITAT FOR DIVINITY

*Now when the king was settled in his house, and the LORD had given him rest from all his enemies around him, the king said to the prophet Nathan, "See now, I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent." Nathan said to the king, "Go, do all that you have in mind; for the LORD is with you." But that same night the word of the LORD came to Nathan: Go and tell my servant David: Thus says the LORD: 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. 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?" Now therefore thus you shall say to my servant David: Thus says the LORD of hosts: I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep to be prince over my people Israel; and I have been with you wherever you went, and have cut off all your enemies from before you; and I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may live in their own place, and be disturbed no more; and evildoers shall afflict them no more, as formerly, from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel; and I will give you rest from all your enemies. 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. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me.*

2 Samuel 7:1-14a (NRSV)

Recently, I took a drive down memory lane. A few weeks ago I led the PF mission trip to Richmond, Virginia, a city where Jennifer and I used to live. As I drove down familiar streets, I would notice shops and restaurants familiar to me from my time in the city where I went to seminary and spent my first few years of marriage. I pointed these things out to my van-load of teenagers, and as you can imagine, they couldn't have cared less.

I also took a quick turn down an average-looking street where Jennifer and I made our first home together. We rented a small Cape Cod house with green shutters and a shade-covered front yard where, despite all my best efforts, not a single blade of grass would grow. That house brought back memories of house-breaking a puppy, buying my first real grown-in-the-ground (as compared with made in a factory) Christmas tree, late-night parties and study sessions, and plenty of time spent with a new wife.

Yet, that house was no longer my home. Now someone else lives there. (I wonder if they are paying the same ridiculously low rent.) Despite the memories that the house evokes, it is just a building. It is a building that for a time contained some great fun and important events, but the joy I knew then had more to do with the people that shared my life than with the place where I kept my stuff.

I've repeated this experience several times throughout my life. I've driven past my childhood home in Missouri to notice a different color paint and my favorite tree cut down. After moving to Virginia in high school, I returned to visit friends in Kansas City and felt the jolt of realization that my former school had gone on without me—relationships had ended, new friendships had started and people changed. Also, I've returned to my college alma-mater to discover that the people I went to school with, like me, had also moved on. There was this whole crowd of young, energetic and thin-waisted doppelgangers that occupied my dorm and were eating in my cafeteria.

Buildings can be special. They can inspire awe or silence like a cathedral or comfort and relaxation like a beach house. Yet, I believe that our feelings about a specific place have much more to do with our experiences there than with the places themselves. A beautiful house can be a place of pain and shame if the specter of abuse dwells inside. A dirty hovel can be a place of joy if love and acceptance can be found within it. The same architecture can inspire attraction or repulsion depending on what happens to a person around or within it.

In today's scripture lesson, we come across the recently established King David. He's finished up the rather messy succession to Israel's throne and he has conquered much of the land promised to Israel by God, most notably the city of Jerusalem. We find him enjoying the trappings of his new office and he begins to think about what got him there. He decides that, since he has a new and wonderful house to live in, God should also have a house, a temple worthy of God.

We'll never know the true motives behind David's desire to build a temple for God. The text does not clue us in. On the one hand, David could have a genuine desire to honor the God who had raised him up from a simple shepherd boy to the ruler of an expanding empire. On the other hand, there is a certain amount of status involved with being the one who builds a temple for a deity. Also, when you've got the dwelling place of God in your capital that tends to lend a certain air of legitimacy to your power. (There's a reason why our presidents hold prayer sessions with Billy Graham before a war and the rulers of nations we fight, like Sadaam Hussein, say their prayers. It's good politics to claim God is on your side.) Furthermore, a great way to let the occupants of a newly conquered city know who is in charge is to replace their religious and cultural symbols with your own. (Think about the endless wars waged over the control over Jerusalem from David's time down to our own. There is a reason why Christians and then Muslims placed their places of worship on top of what was the location of the Jewish temple.) Like most of us, David was a person motivated by a variety of conflicting desires, both selfish and unselfish.

At first, David receives divine support for his plans to build God a house. The prophet Nathan, who later would confront the king about his adulterous and murderous ways, gives the go-ahead, saying "Go, do all that you have in mind; for the Lord is with you." Nathan may have spoken too soon, however, because that night God shows up to tell the prophet how God really feels about the matter. But God's answer seems a little disjointed. At first, God seems to refute the idea that God even needs a temple, and then

God seems to approve the plan with the caveat that David's son, rather than David himself, will carry out the building plan.

God begins by revisiting the history of God's relationship with Israel. God reminds the king that since the time when God brought the Israelites out of Egypt, God has never dwelt in a house. Instead, God's presence could be found in a tabernacle, really a glorified tent that can be moved from place to place. Yes, that's right, God cruises around in a mobile home! Furthermore, God seems to like the divine Winnebago just fine. God has never even said one word that would indicate that God was looking to settle down. God says to David, "Who are you to build a house for me?" Like a senior citizen with an Airstream trailer, God is not interested in being domesticated. Settle down? Not this God. God will go where God pleases thank you very much.

Then God reminds David of how God brought David from the sheep pasture to the throne room. It's as if God reminds David who helps out whom. God says, "I took you out of the pasture. I cut off your enemies. I made for you a great name. I brought the nation Israel to this land." Let's not forget who the one is in control. There is a lesson here about pride. A lot of claims are made by people who profess to be doing something for God, but they really are doing it for themselves.

Then God makes a play on the word "house." The passage begins with David talking about his own house. Then he speaks of a house or temple for God. Then God speaks about the prospects of a house for God. Finally, God turns the phrase and speaks of making a "house" for David. Yet, this "house" refers to David's dynasty. Israel was new to this whole king thing. Their first one didn't work out so well. Old king Saul was shown up by David, disgraced in battle and ended up committing suicide. Then David takes control. There was a question here of who would be the king after David. God settles the confusion and says that God will provide a son who will rule after David and David's line will continue to rule. David's son will be the one who builds God a house.

A friend of mine likes to tell the story of one of his memories from getting his Doctorate of Ministry. One day in class, one of his professors looked at all the ministers in the classroom who would quote scripture to make their point and he opened up the Bible to one of the prophets. Prophetic oracles usually begin with the words, "The word of the Lord came to so and so..." or "Thus says the Lord..." The professor said, "You've got to ask yourselves 'Who says, 'Thus says the Lord?'" He meant that just as anyone can quote scripture to back up one point or another, the claims on behalf of God are not immune to political bias. The prophets were no exception. Their oracles were shaped by their own political viewpoints or the views of those who edited them. I think we have an occurrence of editing in this passage.

God seems to move from dismissing the idea of a temple altogether to saying, "Alright you can have a temple but we'll postpone it a generation." Scholars have explained the seeming disagreement in the text as the work of various editors representing different political and religious concerns.<sup>i</sup> The original oracle of Nathan probably was an explanation of why God did not need a temple, but later writers looking to justify their

own relationship to the eventual Jerusalem temple modified things a bit. So, a declaration against temples all together becomes an explanation of why David's son Solomon, rather than David, built the temple and a justification for that building occurring in the first place.

As we now have it, there is a tension between a desire for a tangible place to find God and God's refusal to be limited to any particular place. That same tension exists within us today. Buildings can be fine places to focus our attention on God or to turn our attention away from God all together.

I tend to identify more with the earlier edition of the oracle. I think the God we find in the Bible seeks to resist the limitations that humans want to put on God, whether those are national, political, ethnic or theological. Indeed, a few generations later Israel was conquered, Jerusalem was sacked and the temple was destroyed. The people of Israel had identified themselves and their God with a certain place. When that place was gone, they had to discover anew the God who was not bound to a particular place or building. They had also identified themselves with a particular place and once they were taken into exile, they had to ask themselves who they were.

There is a lesson here for the church and for our particular church. There is a danger in too closely identifying ourselves with a building. I'm always saddened when I hear about a church that has been destroyed by fire or other disaster. Yet, I am amazed and inspired on some of those occasions where I will hear the minister declare that the church is not a building but a community of believers. I recall one such church that was burned down during the spree of church arson fires a few years ago. The next Sunday the people who made up that church gathered together for worship to signify that their community was not limited to a building and that they would not be intimidated by racism. It raises the question, "If our church building were destroyed tomorrow, would our church cease to exist or would our community of faith continue on?"

Don't get me wrong. I love our building. I especially enjoy worshipping in our sanctuary. I love the blast of the organ. I love the Gospel writers etched in the windows. I love many things about it, but most of all I love it because of the people who come to it every week. I believe that I would view even the most beautiful parts of our building differently, if I had not been so loved by the people in it.

A church building should be a place where people can encounter God. If that is not the case, something is wrong. The church building, however, must not become the only place one looks for God. The danger that God resists in our scripture passage is one of domesticating the divine. If we know where God is, then we know where God is not. When I want God, I know where to find God, and when I don't particularly want to run into God, then I know which piece of real estate to avoid. God is with us in every place and in every time. If we expect to see God only at the church building, then we are missing out on much of what God wants for us and our lives. If we "lock God up" inside the church building, we seek to control God and to control what God can do in our world.

While I was doing graduate work at Emory University, I spoke with a seminary student who had returned from a trip to Israel. I remember him feeling very disillusioned with not just the political situation in general but with religion in general. He said, “I’m rethinking what it means to call a place sacred. I’m not sure if any place is sacred in and of itself.” Seeing the bitter disputes over the Temple Mount between Jews and Muslims was certainly dispiriting, but he also was reacting against the way Christians fought among themselves.

At the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, which tradition claims is located at the spot where Jesus was buried and resurrected, no less than six different Christian denominations lay claim to the site, including the Ethiopian Orthodox Church which maintains a chapel on the roof of one of the buildings because of a centuries-old dispute with one of the other groups. Sometimes the nastiest fights occur among Christians over the use of a church building, whether it is in Jerusalem or Anytown, USA, whether it is who has the rights to Christ’s tomb or which color paint for the bathroom ceiling. In such disputes, the purpose for the church building in the first place gets lost.

That purpose gets spelled out in the Christian scriptures where the imagery of temple or “house of God” gets put to a new purpose. In the letter to the Church at Ephesus, Paul writes, “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.” (2:19-22) The Church is not a building but a community of followers of Christ. God dwells not in a building but in the hearts of those who love and worship God. The purpose of this church building and every other church building is to help enable such a community to exist. To confuse the Church with its building is to miss the whole point of Christianity.

God’s dwelling place is in a building all right, but not a building in a literal sense. God dwells in a building made up of individual believers' lives. The French priest and writer Michel Quoist has a book simply entitled *Prayers*. In it there is a collection of wonderfully poetic and evocative expressions of human conversation with God. He has one entitled “The Brick,” which gets at what I am trying to say.

*The bricklayer laid a brick on the bed of cement.  
Then, with a precise stroke of his trowel, spread another layer.  
And, without a by-your-leave, lead on another brick.  
The foundations grew visibly.  
The building rose, tall and strong, to shelter men.*

*I thought, Lord, of that poor brick buried in the darkness at the base of the big building.  
No one sees it, but it accomplishes its task, and the other bricks need it.  
Lord, what difference whether I am on the rooftop or in the foundations of your building,  
as long as I stand faithfully at the right place?<sup>ii</sup>*

May this prayer be ours as we let God construct our community of faith.

Rev. Chase Peeples

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The Congregational Church of Manhasset, New York (UCC)

## PASTORAL PRAYER

God, you are our builder and the architect of our lives. You have created us and brought us together as a community. We thank you for the building we worship in, for the people who helped it to be built and for those who keep it maintained. Yet, more than these things, we thank you for the people who have occupied this building. We thank you for the couples who have been married here, the children that have been baptized and confirmed here, the lives honored at funerals here, the friendships that have bloomed here and the many other people who have made up our community. Most of all, we thank you for the many acts of charity, service and love that have occurred here. May there be many more and may they all be pleasing to you. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> P. Kyle McCarter, *II Samuel* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1984) 209-231. Although, there are some notable scholars who view this chapter as one literary unit composed at a single time.

<sup>ii</sup> Michel Quoixt, *Prayers*, Trans. Agnes Forsyth and Anne Marie de Commaille (Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1991): 23.