

What About the Building?
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2 Samuel 7:1-14a

It's been a fact throughout human history that people show a particular affinity for building huge and ornate structures to honor whatever deities they worship. From the first ziggurats in what is now Iraq, to the temples built by the Greeks and Romans and indigenous peoples in Central and South America, to Buddhist and Shinto shrines in Asia, and to the great cathedrals of Europe, these structures reach up to the sky and try to communicate something about the grandeur due God's name. This building is no different. Despite its somewhat smaller scale, it too "speaks" – not only to where the center of our worship is (that is, the altar) but also about the reverential and awe-filled experience walking into this space is meant to provide.

When we meet David this morning, we find him contemplating his own major building project. His goal is to make God's dwelling place at least as nice as his own. To David's way of thinking, God deserves it, after the people have finally achieved the safety and security God promised to their ancestors after years of political turmoil and wars, with God's help. It's understandable that David would want to mark this new era with something more permanent to house the Ark of the Covenant – the tangible signs of God's presence among the people - than putting up yet another tent for it. Adding a splendid temple to David's splendid palace would be just the thing to symbolize the new-found stability for a people who'd spent much of their history to this point wandering around and being attacked. Of course, the major problem with this idea is that God is, well, *God*. Any house worthy of God would have to be at least as nice as,

say, Windsor Castle. Building it would mean importing a lot of the finest cedar from Lebanon; getting stone from the quarry for the foundation; finding precious metals to outfit the Holy of Holies, that innermost room where the Ark would rest; and of course drafting very many human hands to do the actual construction.

God's response to David's idea raises the question about whether this project is about God's needs, or about David's own insecurity and wanting to be like everyone else. As to the latter, several scholars have called it an act of understandable self-aggrandizement, where he's trying to make himself seem just that much bigger than he actually is. Maybe, now that he's got time to think about where he is and how he got there, he can take a fresh look at the concept of a temple without having to worry about wars or politics.¹ Without them, the need for God to have a suitable house is an obvious one. To David's way of thinking, everyone is settled, and David himself has a grand palace to live in. What better way is there to honor that, and the God who never wavered in supporting them, than to build God a dwelling place that's bigger, better, and more permanent than even the best quality Army tent?

God questions the wisdom of David's proposed building project, through the words God gives the prophet Nathan: "Are YOU the one to build me a house to live in?" (2 Sam 7:5, NRSV) The answer to that is, as we will discover, no. It will be the job of future generations to build, and re-build, what would come to be known as the Jerusalem Temple. Permanent housing for God is not a part of the basic covenant of, "I will be your God, and you will be my people." Up until this point, God had traveled with

¹ Robert Hoch, "Commentary on 2 Samuel 7:1-14a." <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/ordinary-16-2/commentary-on-2-samuel-71-14> [accessed July 16, 2024].

the people. The outward symbols of that presence were the Tent of Meeting, which sheltered the Ark of the Covenant, and the pillar of cloud and fire which the people followed on their way up out of Egypt. God's objection is that God has been literally "walking back and forth" (vv. 6-7), with the people, and providing leaders like Moses, Aaron, Joshua, and David himself, to shepherd them.² Because of the relatively unsettled quality of the Israelite community up until this point in its history, God's "house" is where God *chooses* to be worshiped, not where humans think God should be worshiped.

The theological claim that the editors of 2 Samuel 7 are trying to make is that God's presence is not dependent upon a fixed location provided by David or anyone else. This claim sets the Israelites apart from many of their neighbors. They all believed that a deity lived in his or her temple, just as people live in their own houses. For the Israelites to effectively say that they want to be like everyone else, and have tied God's presence to a specific, settled location signals a major shift in their relationship with God. That relationship defines who they are as a people. If they're on the road, God is visibly on the road with them. If they are settled in one place, God should be settled visibly in one place.

However, they will eventually discover that there is a major drawback to having a "settled" God. If we read just a bit further in the Bible's account of history, we learn that they would eventually come to think that they didn't have to rely on God as much as they did when they were wandering in the desert. To give up that reliance would be like,

² Elna K. Solvang, "Commentary on 2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16."
<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-of-advent-2/commentary-on-2-samuel-71-11-16> [accessed July 16, 2024].

say, asking Snoopy to give up his doghouse. It's so much a part of who Snoopy is, that it's hard to think of what he would be, and do, without it.

We found out something about that essential question of place and identity during the early days of the pandemic. Then, it was a question of how to be, and to do things together as "The Church" when we could not be tied to the permanent place that is this building. We had to learn, quickly, how to make use of the virtual spaces available to us. Along the way, we also discovered that, while this building – this house our spiritual ancestors built – remains an important symbol of the relationships we have with God and with one another, it's the people who matter the most.

God's presence among us does not depend on God's having a fine house made of cedar (or stone and stained glass!). It does not mean that these buildings we have put so much collective time and energy into over the years are bad, or even misplaced. They do help us to focus on something outside of ourselves, which is never a bad thing. But, does God need them as much as we think God needs them? Maybe. Maybe not. Our long history with God tells us that God shows up where and when God chooses. What the where and when looks like, by human standards, does not matter. And as Jesus would remind his disciples hundreds of years after David first thought of building the Temple, whenever two or three are gathered together in his name, he will be right there in the midst of them. In the end, that promise is the only thing that matters.