

PILGRIM

CHURCH

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BUILDING A HOUSE FOR GOD

II Samuel 7: 1 – 14a July 19, 2009

Pilgrim Bud Precise

Our Old Testament text in II Samuel for today reflects what must have been an honest debate in Israel about the tension between God's freedom and God's presence. Building a permanent temple for God would guarantee God's presence – but that goes against God's freedom. David's proposed building a temple is a mixed act of genuine loyalty to God and a self-serving way to make his government legitimate. In the ancient world, the most obvious way of making a government legitimate was to build a temple. God's permanent residence would solidify the regime of David. This permanent residence of God removes the possibility that God might depart. The problem is that it stands over against the tabernacle, which represents God's freedom and mobility. On the journey from bondage in Egypt, through all the wandering for 40 years in the wilderness, the Hebrew people had this portable tabernacle. It was the first thing they put up when they stopped at a place and it was always carried in front of the people when they were moving. It was the Tent of Meeting – the place where God spoke with Moses about the people of Israel. It was temporary. The people were on the move and God was present with them. God is not nailed down in one place – God is on the move with the people of Israel.

God, speaking to the prophet Nathan says that in all Israel's moving about, God never asks for a temple. The freedom and mobility of God is important. Nathan apparently sees no contradiction between the character of God and the requirements of the royal regime of David. We have been down that path in our own country, haven't we? There are good, God fearing patriots who see no difference between the Kingdom of God and the American way of life. God is on our side. Of course, God wants what we want. And every time, that gets us in trouble. God does not always bless our methods and our intent as a nation. Nathan understands God to be in step with the regime of King David. But the text seems clear that God will not be held in one place by any religious arrangement – that is, a temple to dwell in. God will not be bought off, controlled, or domesticated by a cedar dwelling place.

God has led David and the people in the past. And there is assurance in the text that God will lead them in the future. God will make David a great name. God will appropriate a place for him, and God will give him a place of rest. There is an interesting play in the text on the Hebrew word for house. It can mean two things – a temple, or a dynasty. How quickly our text turns to the discussion of building a dynasty. The discussion is no longer about the problem of housing God – for God does not permit or want a temple. Instead, this oracle of God begins to introduce the concept of the dynasty of King David. Verse 13 does seem to point to Solomon, who actually did build the temple. The house King David is building is a dynasty for the people of God.

I think the debate between building a permanent dwelling – so that God would always be present in this one place – and the understanding that God is free, God is spirit, God is like the wind, God cannot be bound in a building made by hands - is important for us to understand. Of course, we always want God on our side. Of course, we would like this place where we could always keep God. It is a way of control. That was the whole debate between Jonah and God. God calls to Jonah – "Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come before me." What does Jonah do? He goes down the port of Joppa, where he found a ship bound for Tarshish and he pays the fare and gets on board. He is going away

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from Nineveh – he is getting out of what he thinks is the boundary where God rules. Jonah doesn't want to preach to Nineveh. He doesn't want God to even acknowledge their presence. Israel has just lost a war with the people on Nineveh. Jonah believes if he can get out of the territory where God rules, then God cannot make him go to Nineveh. What he discovers is that God cannot be controlled. God cannot be located in one place. All of the world belongs to God. Building a temple will not domesticate God. It will not locate God in one place. The temple built by Solomon actually had a room called the "Holy of Holies." It was the room where God dwelt. The High Priest went in there once a year. And then he had a rope around his ankle so that if something happened to him, they could drag him out. If any ordinary person went in the Holy of Holies, that person would immediately die.

How do we get to the idea of building a temple for God? The idea of a temple developed from people discovering places where they met with God. For example, the Garden of Eden. Or take the story of Moses at the burning bush. "Do not come near, Moses; put off your shoes from your feet, for the place on which you stand is holy ground." The American Indians had special places where they met God. In Mexico City, close to the Cathedral of Guadalupe, there are steps leading to the top of a hill where Mary appeared to a young Mexican girl. People climb up to that sacred place, they make their way up all those steps on their knees. Why? It is a place where they want to meet God. We are in the process of trying to find a site to build a building – a place where we will meet God. Place is important to us. But our permanent site will not limit the freedom of God. Rather as we meet God there, God will be more free as we go into the world to be the People of God.

I was teaching students in a confirmation class. We were meeting on a Sunday. The Saturday night before we met, there was a tornado that came very close to our church. It actually knocked down some trees and the area was in a mess. I asked the class what would happen to the church if the tornado actually destroyed our building. The class began to talk about places in the church they would miss. They wondered where we could go to meet. Then they began to realize that even if the tornado destroyed the building, we would still be the church – because the church was the people. It is an old method of teaching. Grasp your hands together. "Here is the church." Stick up your fore fingers. "Here is the steeple." Turn your hands over and hold up your fingers. "Open the door and see all the people."

God dwells not in a house made of cedar or a tower of steel, or a glass cathedral. God dwells in flesh and blood. The house of God comes to our lives through words and acts of compassion, understanding, forgiveness, justice. I think the discussion of a dwelling place for God will always lead us to God's presence in our lives, in our way of living. This idea of a place for God is important. When I was working with our children to serve as acolytes, I tried to talk of the importance of the sanctuary space. This space is sacred to us because we do sacred things in it. We baptize our babies. We marry our young. We have memorial services for those who die. We come every Sunday to worship. Is this space more sacred than the Sunday School room? The gym? The park? No, but what we do here is we are intentional about being in God's presence.

Let us take care of our lives – that place where God dwells. Let our speaking and our living reflect the God we love and serve with that living.