

© John H. Young, 2024. This sermon may be reproduced, in part or in whole, and by any means, for personal use, group study, or similar non-commercial purposes without charge or further permission. Credit should be given for group use. Commercial reproduction and distribution are prohibited except with the written permission of John H. Young.

Bridge Street United Church
July 21, 2024
Readings: II Samuel 7:1-17; Psalm 139; Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

On God Making a House for Us

Today Old Testament lesson begins: “Now when the king was settled in his house, and the Lord had given him rest from all his enemies around him.” Note the timing of this event, when David decides he wants to build a temple in Jerusalem. He has settled in his house, a fine palace built of cedar, a highly valued wood in that day. He had rest from all his enemies; in other words, the almost constant conflict that had been a feature of his career, both before and after he became king, now had subsided. He had rest, and the accompanying luxury, for David, of a relatively settled life and a time for reflection. We ourselves know, too, that if we have led a very busy life with little time for rest or relaxation, a chance to leave that behind and be able to take time to reflect looks very attractive.

David now had that time. And in this reflection it came to him that it would be good to build a temple to house the Ark of the Covenant that he had brought to Jerusalem. You may remember that the move of the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem was the subject of the previous chapter of II Samuel and a focal point in last week’s sermon.

David checks this intention with the prophet Nathan, who says to the king, “Go ahead.” But that night Nathan hears a word from God, a word that Nathan shares with David the next day. That word was that David should not build the temple, that it would be built instead by a son of his, Solomon, in fact, though Solomon is not mentioned by name in this story. Then God promises that David’s house will occupy the throne forever.

Today's sermon will be a bit more like a Bible study, for I want to pick up some particular features of this story, features that I think have significance for us.

First, this story, like the previous one on which I preached last Sunday, namely the move of the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem, is an example of someone acting from mixed motives. That David wanted to build a temple worthy of housing the Ark, the central religious symbol of ancient Israel, was laudable. It was an act reflecting deep faith, and I think it was sincere. At the same time, David had to know it was politically advantageous. In that ancient world, kings, who assumed that they had some special link to God, often built splendid temples for the particular deity they worshipped. It was religiously important, but it also enhanced the prestige of the monarch and the esteem in which he was held. When Solomon does build a magnificent temple after he is king, that work added to Solomon's prestige. It would have added to David's had he built such a temple, and he knew it. Again, mixed motives, similar to what we saw last week with David's move of the Ark to Jerusalem.

But, second, I think that, the way the story is told, God's rebuke of David's intention reflects that God is not to be controlled. In the story, God tells Nathan to say to David: "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. People in that day thought differently about God's presence than we do now. We may well regard a church building such as this one as a holy place, and there are reasons to do so. But I do not think that we would think that God is somehow present here, let alone captured here, as opposed to being here but also elsewhere. I do not want to suggest that ancient peoples saw God as present only in a place where a special sacred symbol or representation of God was present, but they leaned in that direction much more than we would. As I mentioned last week, having the

Ark of the Covenant in the city of Jerusalem heightened the importance of the city, and that is one reason why David wanted it there. But having the Ark in a temple increased even more that sense of God present in the city in a special way. God would have been seen to be present in a way and to an extent greater than God would be present elsewhere. But in this story, the reference to God moving around reflected the idea that David was not going to be able to put God in some kind of box and thus control God. God would move where God chose, and God would be with the entire people, not just David, the royal family, the priesthood, and the other officials centred in Jerusalem.

As I noted, we would not regard this church building, or any church building, in the way people in ancient Israel regarded the Temple after Solomon had built it. But the notion of controlling God, or having God's agenda and our agenda overlapping—that is a temptation to which we, too, are susceptible. It may not be that we would think, explicitly, about controlling God. However, when we think our agenda and God's agenda are increasingly aligned, that God is somehow present to us in a way God is not present to, or supportive of, others, it becomes easier to believe that God is on our side, easier to make God in our image, rather than understanding ourselves, and every other person, as being in God's image.

I remember, in my days as a Ph.D. student in Dallas, a student colleague of mine being invited to attend a congregational meeting in a nearby church to help lead a discussion of what was a divisive issue in the wider denomination. One woman, in the course of a small group discussion of which my colleague was part, "When I see how angry this matter makes my husband, George, I know just how God feels." That incident has stayed with me as a good example of the tendency I see criticized in this story. It is not that we control God. We don't, as David hoped to do, have God present somehow in some special way that is advantageous to us. I

think our equivalent is when we do see God as somehow valuing us more than others, present to us more than to others, increasingly like us, to the point that we begin to create God in our image, rather than the other way around.

A third point about this story. In response to David wanting to build a temple, God's word to the prophet Nathan, that Nathan is to pass on to King David, emphasizes what God has done for David. God's words here emphasize the fact that David is not a self-made man, a self-made hero. Nathan is told to remind David what God has done for him and also why God has done it. Listen again to the words of the text: "Then 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 what follows this recital is noteworthy. When David was considering building a temple, he seemed to be thinking about what he had accomplished. But in God's response, the emphasis is not on what David has done, though there is this recital of God's blessings to David. But what follows is an indication of why God has blessed David as he has. Again, the text runs: "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." The emphasis here is on the people of Israel. God's blessing of David in the various ways enumerated has been for the well-being of the people of Israel, and not for David's own status.

I think the thing for us to keep in mind when we hear this part of the story is a warning against thinking of ourselves as self-made. It is an easy temptation into which to fall, for most of us do work hard to attain the education or the job or the position or whatever it is that enables us to earn a living. The talents and skillsets we need do not come easily.

But the other reality is that none of us is self-made and that things beyond our control—for example, the family into which we were born, where we were born, opportunities we had or did not have—those things and others I could name often determine what is possible for us, no matter how hard we work. David gets reminded here that the remarkable rise he has had is not something totally, indeed even largely, the result of his own work. That aspect is also a good reminder for us.

Finally, perhaps most importantly, this story contains one of the most significant theological developments in the Old Testament. In this story, God promises to make a house for David. It is not a physical house, of course, but it is the promise of a dynasty, the promise that descendants of David would rule forever. Accompanying that promise was another one, namely, that though God would punish David's son and those subsequent monarchs from David's line when they did wrong, God would never abandon them. They would always know God's steadfast love.

Now, descendants of David did rule in Judah, that southern kingdom where David first becomes king, for almost 400 years after David's death. They ruled until Jerusalem, where the temple that David's son Solomon built, was captured by the Babylonians and the kingdom of Judah was folded into the Babylonian empire. A portion of the population was taken into exile in Babylon.

So, that Davidic line ceased to rule. But in exile in Babylon, this understanding of David's line continuing to rule and of God's steadfast love became understood in a different way. It is in exile that the idea arose, in Judaism, that a Messiah would come, a monarch who was a descendant of David, and who would rule with justice and equity, indeed, would rule differently from the way many of David's descendants had ruled. So, it is out of this promise of God to

build a house for David that, in Judaism, the notion of a future Messiah has its origin. The concept gets developed and fleshed out in passages of Scripture that come from the time when the people are in exile in Babylon. The latter part of the book of Isaiah, which comes in part from the period when the people of Judah are in exile and in part after they return home, is one place where the concept of a future Messiah, an idealized monarch, is particularly developed. The related promise of God's steadfast love comes to be seen as something with which all the people will be blessed, not something that only the monarch will receive.

I want to stress that when we read this passage, we should not see it as referring to Jesus. But it is not hard to see why Jesus' earliest followers, all of whom were Jewish, picked up on this concept of a future Messiah, a concept whose roots lie here.

That related promise, that God's steadfast love was something for all the people and would always be present, is something that does develop more fully in early Christianity. We see it reflected especially in Paul's letters, the earliest of the New Testament writings. One could example would be the end of the eighth chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans, where, after talking about the challenges Christians in Rome, and elsewhere, faced, he also wrote that there was absolutely nothing that could separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ. It is a passage we often read at funerals, and it is one to which I find myself recalling personally when I am in challenging situations. It is a passage to which I have made reference in sermons when I have been speaking about times when we, as individuals, or as a congregation, or as a denomination as a whole, or as the Christian church in this country, may find ourselves facing troubles or significant challenges. That steadfast love of God, which surrounds us always, is a comfort. The concept of God's steadfast love is found elsewhere in Scripture, yes, but it plays a key part in this story.

As I noted earlier in this sermon, I think that this story about David's desire to build a temple, something God informs him will be done instead by his son, contains some significant messages for us. But it may be that that last point is the most important one. All of us, if we live very long at all, know significant challenges in our lives. Sometimes those challenges arise in situations where we are unsure what we ought to do. But often they arise in situations where we experience losses—the loss by death of someone we love, the loss of a dream, the loss of a relationship, the loss of our health—and I could go on. It is in those moments when we feel most challenged, perhaps feel most unsure of what the future will hold or how we shall cope, that we need to hear again that promise of God, that promise of God's steadfast love, that promise that God will make us a house. It is a promise not just to King David's descendants, but to each of us, to you and to me. And to that God who promises us such steadfast love, to the one through whom we have come to know that God most fully, and to the Holy Spirit, the presence of that God with us now and with us always, be all honour, glory, and praise, Amen.\

Resources:

Brueggemann, Walter. *First and Second Samuel*. Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990.

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/> [Accessed July 16, 2024]