

Advent 4 B 2017

Cathedral Church of St. John, Albuquerque

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2 Sam 7:1-16; Canticle 15; Romans 16:25-27; Luke 1:26-38

The summer I left the convent I had some huge decisions to make, including where I would go next. I could stay in my father's house in northern NJ. Or I could seek another monastic community. Or I could dwell in a little tent on the Appalachian Trail. Or I could take up residence with a kind stranger in slum housing in SC. Depending on which piece of real estate I chose, I was making a different kind of statement about my life and how I saw my relationship with the world at that time.

God is very much in the real estate business. When the Hebrew people left slavery in Egypt in a great hurry and crossed the Red Sea under the leadership of Moses, God went before them as a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. Then Moses went up on Mt. Sinai and brought down the stone tablets of the 10 Commandments, and those were put into the Ark of the Covenant, a specially constructed box with long poles so that it could be carried by the people as they went through the wilderness. The people understood that God had sort of moved into this box. It was kept in a special tent, which only the high priests were allowed into. When the people finally moved into the Promised Land they found it was already occupied. God had forgotten to tell them that little detail, and they had to fight, bribe, steal, and beg their way into a homeland. The people were governed by judges like Samuel, Deborah and Nathan, people who were close to God and close to the people who could instruct the people as God had led them. And that was OK—the people lived in tents, God lived in a tent, and it was close and intimate.

But the people saw that everybody else around them had real kings who lived in real palaces, and there they were with a God who lived in a box which stayed in a tent which had seen better days by far, and they felt inferior to the other peoples. They wanted a king too, with a real palace and a real temple. They moaned and whined and begged and God got angry at them, but finally God gave them what they wanted. He gave them a king; Saul. That was fine for awhile but then Saul disobeyed God and God raised David to replace him.

David went from being a simple shepherd to the greatest king of all Israel and Judah, moved into his palace and then noticed God was still in a tent. He felt a bit funny about that. "See now, I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent. I should build him a Temple!" But God replied through Nathan, "Aw, Dave, I don't need a house! From the day I brought up the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt to this day, I have been moving about in a tent. I like the tent—I can be with the people, among them, vulnerable with them in a tent. But I have given YOU a house, and now I will give you a whole household. I will give you descendants. I will never take my love from them."

So David did not build God the house of cedar, but his son Solomon did. He built a fabulous temple on Mt. Zion in Jerusalem that was one of the great architectural marvels of the time. They moved the Ark of the Covenant into the Temple, and the glory of God came and rested on the temple. It became the holy place for all God's people, the symbol of their close

relationship with God until it was destroyed and the people of God hauled off into exile into Babylon. It was utterly devastating.

*“By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept,
and our tormenters cried for mirth, saying
‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’
But how shall we sing the Lord’s song in an alien land?”*

It took them generations to figure out how they could be God’s people away from God’s Holy Land, away from God’s house, the Temple. There in the pain of exile they learned God does NOT dwell in a house made of cedar. God does NOT dwell in marvelous palaces, or with the high and mighty. God was present to them even in exile, in their suffering, in their lonely lostness. God was never absent. They eventually came home from the exile and rebuilt the Temple, but never again did God’s glory come and rest on it.

Generations later, God sent an angel to a young woman, a nobody who had no resume, no credentials, no skills to speak of, but who loved and trusted God and that gave her all the qualifications necessary. And the angel said

“Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now you will conceive in your womb and bear a son and you will name him Jesus. 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 forever and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

Does that sound strange? Try hearing it through these words:

“Do not be afraid, Mary. For I will carry on in you the promise I made to Abraham and Sarah, to Moses, to Noah, to David your ancestor. If you are willing, I will build my home in you. You will bear my son. Your body will be the temple in which I will truly dwell forever and ever.”

Notice where this story does NOT happen. It does not happen in a temple or a church or a mansion. It does not happen in a press conference with TV cameras or on some movie star’s back lawn. It happens, I like to think, in the kitchen of the simple hut of an unassuming woman who is willing to be interrupted. There is laundry on the line and a few bowls in the bucket for washing. Her hands are chapped and red from scrubbing. There is a wisp of hair in her eyes. She is a real woman, a human being, with a body that will grow old, develop arthritis and a sore back. She will lose hair, get wrinkled, become flabby, and eventually will take a deep breath and die. That body is another kind of tent, really, vulnerable and a little shabby. But in this story God makes a permanent choice for what kind of real estate God will dwell in and that is a human body, beginning with Mary’s body. No more clouds of glory over a Temple. God chooses intimacy with humanity.

God’s Mary house is in a big neighborhood. It’s lots of houses, really, all connected by living wires of love, conduits of service, networks of communication, and sewer systems of forgiveness. Included in this neighborhood are God’s other houses: God’s Carolyn house, God’s Elena house, God’s Diane house, God’s Michael house, God’s your name house and God’s Cathedral house.

Mary took a risk on God by saying yes. Notice what was NOT disclosed by the angel: he did not show Mary the whole floor plan. The angel said nothing about her son's conflicts with religious authorities, nothing about him being rejected, nothing about his strange behavior in public. Mary was not warned about Jesus' seeming rejection of her. She was not told about how he would be mocked, scorned, arrested on accusations of blasphemy and, finally, the angel was utterly silent on the crucifixion. This was not exactly full disclosure. It would never hold up in a court of law.

But that's the way it always is in the life of faith. We are never shown the full picture. We are promised certain things: that God will be with us always, that God will love us and welcome us no matter what we have done, that God will guide us when we ask and, at the last, God will receive our final breath into the fullness of Godself. Death will never have the last word over us. But the specifics—those are always shrouded in Mystery.

God's creation is not yet finished. As long as God is willing to continue making God's home in us, and as long as we are willing to be God's home, God's temple, God's body, then all things are yet possible in God. We are caught up in this amazing dance of creation, incarnation, invitation, risk, and joy. All that God requires of us—and this is entirely our choice—is our yes. Are you willing to be God's dwelling place in service to this world?

Because it does go both ways. God dwells in us and we dwell in God. We are God's tent. God is our home. It's a marvelous dance of love. God's choosing real estate with us means God is committed to us. God assumed nothing. God never intrudes. God waits for our yes. What do you say?