

“THE EDIFICE COMPLEX”

Scripture Readings: 2 Samuel 7:1-17; Mark 13:1-2

Introduction to the Old Testament Reading -

Let me start with a history lesson:

On June 20, 1781, 500 soldiers from the Continental Army marched on the Congress of the Confederation demanding they be paid for their service during the American Revolutionary War. The national government, having no army of its own, made a plea to the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania to protect the members of Congress from the mutineers. Pennsylvania declined as the soldiers mobbed Independence Hall in Philadelphia. The members of Congress fled Philadelphia for Princeton. The crisis wouldn't pass until several days later when General George Washington sent 1500 troops to put down the uprising. So ended the Pennsylvania Mutiny of 1783.

But there was a lasting effect of this brief event – James Madison would cite the mutiny in *Federalist* no. 43 as a reason why the federal government needed to establish its own national capitol, to guarantee its own security. And such was the origin of Washington D.C., a capitol city created as a federal district under exclusive control of the federal government rather than as a part of any state.

This was not a new idea, back in 1788, establishing a capitol city as a way of consolidating a nation's power. That's exactly what King David did in the chapters prior to our Old Testament Reading this morning. He violently evicted the Jebusites out of Jerusalem, the so-called “City of Peace,” and established a new capitol district which he named the City of David. Then he brought the symbol of traditional tribal power, the ark of the covenant, into his new city. And now, in our reading this morning, David makes plans to complete his grab for legitimacy – he proposes to build a temple in the new city just like every other ruler in the ancient world did. This would give the national God a beautiful house of worship, a permanent residence, and come under the monarch's control.

It would be the crowning achievement of David's assumption of power in Israel. But in our reading this morning there's just one problem with David's plan – God doesn't want any part of it.

Old Testament Reading: 2 Samuel 7:1-17

Gospel Reading: Mark 13:1-2

As I begin the second half of my sabbatical tomorrow, today I want to recollect something from my last sabbatical when we visited the Greek island of Santorini. From where we stayed we had the proto-typical view of a Greek island – beautiful blue ocean, white sand shore, and circling up the hillside were beautiful white buildings with their brilliant blue domes.

Do you know what those buildings are, those blue domed buildings you've seen in so many pictures? They're chapels. They're family chapels built next to the family home so that infant baptisms, first communions, confirmations and weddings can be held there; not in the Greek

Orthodox church, but in the family chapel. These chapels function as signs of both religious piety and higher social status for well-to-do Greek families.

The sight of these chapels was beautiful in my American eyes but not so much through the eyes of my relatives, all of whom are Greek Evangelical Christians not Greek Orthodox. For them, these chapels represent a kind of social, privatized Christianity – a family cultural practice meant to impress others rather than an expression of real devotion to Jesus Christ.

I wonder if my relatives would have echoed the words of the prophet Nathan from our Old Testament Reading as he chastises King David for the presumption that he could house the One God, Jehovah, the Ancient of Days: *“Are you the one to build me a house to live in?”*

God seems to have two objections to David’s temple-building proposal. The first objection is to the idea of the temple as a permanent structure to house (and domesticate) God. From the time of the Exodus, God had been content to dwell in a tent or tabernacle and God had never asked the tribal leaders to build a temple. God was on the move, going where the people were, where the need was, wherever God wanted to go!

This idea makes particular sense to us followers of Jesus, a savior very much on the move. John’s Gospel calls Jesus the *“Word made flesh”* who *“dwelt among us.”* The original Greek translates more literally to say that, through Jesus, God *“pitched tent”* with us. And that was Jesus, not made for homes or temples but traveling from town to town; here with the sinners, there with the sick and hungry, here in the wilderness and there, crossing over to the “other side” to reach out to those of foreign faith, accent or history. As Jesus puts it, *“birds have nests and foxes have holes but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.”*

So we get this, don’t we, a God on the move who will not be pinned down by our conceptions of who God is? There is no permanent house for God; God outlives them all.

- The Abbey at Cluny, one of the marvels of Medieval architecture that rivaled Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris, was destroyed brick by brick during the French Revolution.
- Robert Schuller’s Crystal Cathedral filed for bankruptcy and was sold to the Roman Catholic archdiocese of Orange County.
- Even the old red brick Congregational Church on Oneida Street in Appleton got condemned to clear the way for the Oneida Street Bridge.

But God is still speaking. God is still being worshiped and followed. God is still on the move among us.

We sometimes speak about the church as being the *“House of God,”* but this passage demands we be clear – God has no house! There is no one predictable place or way in which God appears. People will say to me that they don’t come to church because they encounter God is so many other places. *“I encounter God on the golf course,”* some folks tell me. Well, I don’t know so much about that. I know I encounter a lot of God language on the golf course. And if it’s God language that you’re looking for then Lambeau Field is probably the holiest place I’ve ever been.

But I take the larger point – God isn’t just here in the church, God is on the move:

- on the walking paths of Bubholz Nature Preserve as two friends walk and talk together;
- on the playground of Richmond Elementary School as a teacher comforts a fallen child;

- at your job when someone stops and gently asks a coworker who has been out of sorts all day what's going on;
- at Pillars or COTS or the Warming Shelter as homeless folks find hope;
- in your home as parent and child have The Talk;
- at the Trauma Center of Theda Care hospital in Neenah or Appleton or at St. E's as the medical team works and the family waits anxiously.

That's where God is. And isn't that Good News? Because that's exactly where we need God to be. No house can contain God. No church can keep God in. God is on the move! God is not just here this morning but leaves with you after worship and has gone before you to the places you are about to go the rest of your day.

That's the God we worship: the God of tent and tabernacle, not the God of royal temple. Isn't that what Jesus was telling the disciples in our Gospel Reading? God is on the move, even and especially when moving with us through Crucifixion to Resurrection, from death to life!

The second objection God seems to have to David's plan is to David's role in building a temple: *"Are you the one to build me a house to live in (2 Samuel 7:6)?* It seems God doesn't approve of David and his Edifice Complex.

There is no missing the message here: it's not about David and what he can do for God. This is about God and what God alone can do for David; what God has done and will do through David but for God's glory and purpose, not David's.

In Jerusalem, a journalist heard about a very old Jewish man who had been going to the Western Wall of the temple ruins to pray, twice a day, every day, for a long, long time. She went to the Western Wall and watched the man pray. When he turned to leave, she approached him for an interview.

"Sir, how long have you been coming to the Western Wall to pray?"

"For about 60 years."

"60 years! That's amazing! What do you pray for?"

"I pray for peace between Christians, Jews and Muslims. I pray for all the hatred to stop and I pray for all our children to grow up in safety and friendship."

"How do you feel after doing this for 60 years?"

"Like I'm talking to a brick wall."

And isn't that the way our own lives are lived? In search of personal goals that are seldom reached? In search of personal changes that never come? Someone once said that the largest room in the world is room for improvement.

There is also an old saying that goes like this: If you want to hear God laugh, tell God your plans. Well, David told God his plans and I don't know if God laughed, but God certainly threw it back in David's face.

And that too, is good news. It reminds us that it isn't all up to us. It isn't all about our plans, our hopes, our goals, our success. It's about something bigger than that, bigger than us, bigger than our politicians, bigger than our plans.

Thank God for Jesus who, when asked what made our lives truly fulfilled, did not instruct us to be rich by the time we're thirty, famous by the time we're forty, powerful by the time we're fifty, and venerated by the time we're sixty. Instead, he gave us a very simple instruction, an instruction of one word, really – love. Love God, love yourself, and love your neighbor, meaning “*everybody else.*”

That was the instruction Jesus gave us, a lifestyle of love that can carry us through the hopes that aren't realized, the improvement plans that don't come to fruition, the dreams and goals that come crashing to the ground.

That's what God was saying through Nathan to David:

“You want to build ME a house? Forget it—I'm going to build YOU a house.”

That's what God is saying to **us** this morning: *“The kin-dom that I'm shaping here isn't what you can do for me but what I do through you. I'm doing the building here, not you.”*

So let me suggest that the word to you today from this passage from Second Samuel is, as Aaron Rodgers once put it, R -E-L-A-X. Spell it out with me: R -E-L-A-X. **Relax.** God's purposes for this world are not utterly dependent on your getting it right.

When life is about love and not about success, then you can RISK. Go ahead and live your life and be ready to let go of things like goals and success. You can venture out even if you don't arrive where you planned because God will be there, moving ahead of you, wherever you go. And anyway, sometimes the trip itself is more interesting than its destination.

Go ahead and **love**:

- bet your life on someone, even with second thoughts;
- have children, even when the ones you get aren't the ones you thought you wanted;
- hope, even though you know real hope takes life as it comes;
- dream, even knowing that the most important dreams to come true are God's dreams.

God knows where it all leads, what it finally means. Maybe try placing the emphasis both ways: **God** knows and God **knows**. God is building a house out of us, not the other way around. God is forming a peaceable kin-dom out of what we are and what we do. We are the story God writes. God only knows how it ends.

So whether you achieve all your goals, make progress, or arrive at your planned destinations, when you live a life based on love, here is the promise: God goes with you all the way. And, at the last, Jesus tells us, God will have a house waiting for us all.

Amen.