

The Building Trap

2 Samuel 7:1-14a

Our scripture today is from the story of David, beginning just at the point where David has finally been proclaimed the king of all Israel and has taken up residence in a city that he conquered, Jerusalem. We read from 2 Samuel 7, verses 1-14.

7 Now when the king was settled in his house, and the Lord had given him rest from all his enemies around him, ²the king said to the prophet Nathan, ‘See now, I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent.’ ³Nathan said to the king, ‘Go, do all that you have in mind; for the Lord is with you.’

⁴But that same night the word of the Lord came to Nathan: ⁵Go and tell my servant David: Thus says the Lord: Are you the one to build me a house to live in? ⁶I 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. ⁷Wherever I have moved about among all the people of Israel, did I ever speak a word with any of the tribal leaders of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, ‘Why have you not built me a house of cedar?’ ⁸Now therefore thus you shall say to my servant David: Thus says the Lord of hosts: I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep to be prince over my people Israel; ⁹and 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. ¹⁰And 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, ¹¹from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel; and I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover, the Lord declares to you that the Lord will make you a house. ¹²When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. ¹³He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. ¹⁴I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me.

The Bible is strangely ambivalent about the idea of a temple – a central building for worshipping God. On the one hand, psalm after psalm sings the praises of the temple, as we saw in the excerpt from Psalm 48 that we used as our Call to Worship. Mount Zion – the hill on which the temple is built – is called “beautiful in elevation, the joy of the whole earth.” “Walk about Zion!” the psalmist declares. “Look at it, so you can tell future generations! This is the home of God!” So, the temple’s a good thing, right?

But elsewhere in scripture, we see the prophets Micah and Jeremiah warning the people that the temple is not a good thing, but rather is nothing – that God can destroy it in a second, and it won’t make any difference to God. Which did happen, actually, during Jeremiah’s own lifetime. The temple was demolished, Jerusalem sacked, and the people taken into exile. The

temple became literally nothing. But *then* as soon as the people were able to return from exile, the first thing they did was build a new temple, which once again became the subject of psalms and praises. All the so-called “Psalms of Ascent” around Psalm 120 and following, were written to be sung by pilgrims going up Mount Zion. So, the temple was a good thing again.

Oh, but then, a few centuries later, another Jewish prophet, named Jesus of Nazareth, predicted the destruction of that Second Temple and said that “the day is coming when you won’t need a temple. You shall no longer worship on any mountain but will worship in Spirit and truth” (John 4). So is the temple a good thing or nothing?

Even our own scripture today is ambivalent. David, having finally established his throne in Jerusalem and silenced all their external enemies, says, “It’s not right that I should live in a beautiful palace, while the Ark of God is in an old tent. I want to build a palace to God!” (In Hebrew, *temple* and *palace* are the same word.) The prophet Nathan is all for this idea. I mean, who wouldn’t be? David wants to show honor to God! But then, that night, God sends Nathan back to David, saying, “Hey, did I ever ask for a palace? All the years that I’ve been worshiped in the tabernacle, traveling around from tribe to tribe, did I ever complain? No! That’s what I wanted.” Then God adds, “Instead of you building a house for me out of wood and stone, let me build a house for you – a different kind of house, a house made of handed down traditions and worship. If you and your heirs will be that kind of house to me, I will make your house an eternal house, a dynasty over Israel that will never end.”

Okay, so we’re clear now. The temple thing is a bad idea. God doesn’t want one. But then God concludes with this: “One day you’ll have a son who *will* build me a palace. And that’ll be fine.” So again, is a temple a good thing? Or nothing?

Let’s go back and look at the text more closely. What was wrong with building a temple, anyway? God says he never asked for one – but why *didn’t* he? All he says is that he was content to be associated with a movable shrine. So maybe the thing that God didn’t like was the idea that God was only to be found in one place. The movable tabernacle, which used to make a circuit around the different tribes, communicates that God is on the move, that God is coming to you, that no one place is big enough to contain God. By contrast, a central temple inevitably suggests that *this* is where God can be found – with the unspoken corollary, *and not anywhere else*. In a portable tabernacle, God goes to the people; in a temple, the people are expected to go to God. And I would add another advantage of a tent: it’s humble. Everyone who comes to worship at a

tent shrine – rich or poor, powerful or weak – can be comfortable. But a massive, five-story, gold-plated, jewel-encrusted temple might not feel very welcoming to a poor worshiper. So maybe God wanted a tabernacle instead of a temple so as to communicate first that God is everywhere and can be found where you are, and second, that God welcomes all people, regardless of wealth or status.

This helps us to understand the rest of God's speech to David. Remember how all this started: David wanted to honor God with a palace. And we all nodded along with that, right? Honoring God is good. But what makes us think that a big house honors God? I mean, that's how millionaires and movie stars and Joel Osteen show that they're important, but why would the creator of the universe care about the relative size of a building? Psalm 50 asks this question in a different way. In that psalm, God says, "What makes you think that I'm impressed with all your burnt offerings? Those bulls were already mine. The cattle on a thousand hills already belong to me." The same could be said about a temple/palace. Why would God care that? So what if it's a bigger than a tent? God doesn't need either. Building a big house for God is like giving God a Rolex. So how *do* we honor God? Psalm 50 says, "By bringing me your prayers of thanks and by treating each other with integrity and respect." In a sense, what God said to David was, "I never asked for a big house. If you want to honor me, do this: teach your children to love me, to be true to each other, to live with courage and compassion. Establish a heritage of faithfulness, and that's worth more than all the buildings in the world."

And there's one more problem with the temple idea. When we make things with our own hands to represent God, we always seem to get the two confused. It's the sin of idolatry, and that's what the prophet Jeremiah had denounced in the sixth century before Christ. The people were trusting in the temple to save them, not God. And remember that later prophet? That Jesus of Nazareth? He was condemned to die for the sin of blasphemy. What blasphemy? He had never spoken against God! No, but he had spoken disrespectfully of the temple. That was what he was charged with. Temples become idols.

So that all seems fairly clear, right? Large building built to honor God are just a bad idea. They're misguided from the beginning, God never asked for them, and they put us in peril of falling into idolatry. We should get rid of all church buildings. I'm glad that's sorted. Take out your hymnal now for our second hymn ...

Oh, wait. That was just one side of our ambivalent scripture, wasn't it? After all that, God ended up promising that David's as-yet-unborn son *would* build a temple. And we have all those psalms of praise written to be sung in the temple and in processions to the temple. There must be something good about having temples, too. But what?

To put it simply: God may not need temples, but we do. Mircea Eliade, the great anthropologist, wrote once that the first sign of a religious consciousness in human beings is an awareness of sacred space. That is, we begin to have special places at which we sense the presence of the Other and are filled with awe. Now this doesn't have to be a building. It can be a sacred spring, a crag over a canyon in the Glorieta Mountains of New Mexico (that's one of mine), a church camp, or any place where you received the blessing of knowing God's presence. But it *can* be a building, and especially for those who experience God primarily in the presence of others, it should be a building, a place where people gather. And if you're going to have a building dedicated to the experience of God's presence, then it should be beautiful, because there is nothing short of God that brings us closer to the sense of awe than beauty. To walk into the Cathedral of Chartres, or Saint-Chapelle in Paris, is to be enraptured by beauty and drawn out of yourself. We worship in this place, surrounded by the kaleidoscope light from these windows, inspired by music, because this has become a sacred space for us, and we need sacred spaces. Or, to put it differently, if we tore down all the church buildings tomorrow, on the day after tomorrow, we would start building them up again, because in the limitations of our humanity, we need them.

So what do we do with our scripture? It wasn't a bad idea to build a temple, and it's not a bad thing for us to have a church building. But when David had his idea, God deliberately slowed it down, maybe because he wanted David to be aware that there were dangers there, too. And we also should be aware of the Building Trap. Just because this is where we seek God does not mean that God is only to be found here. And while a beautiful building can be a wonderful aid to seeking God, it must never become so upscale that it excludes some. And this building must never become an idol, something that we care about more than we care about the God it is supposed to direct us toward. Because when temples become idols, God can tear them down, and I do wonder if some of what we are seeing in western Christianity is God dismantling the religious structures that we have started to care more about than we care about God.

And one more thing: we must never think that by having a beautiful building or an inspiring worship service we've adequately honored God. God's not impressed with buildings. Here's what God would receive as honor: Do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with your God. Do that, and teach others to do that, and that honors God more than all the buildings in the world.

Final Word: Congregational hymn

Blessing:

*Let us resolve to take the Christ light with us from this place.
As it goes, it shines light on the darkness, hope on the shadow of death.
Let us bear the light of Christ with us as we go.*