

Title: Building a House for God

Date: 12/24/2023 (Advent 7, formerly known as Advent 4, Year B)

Location: St. Alban's Episcopal Church

Service: 10am Holy Eucharist (Hybrid)

Readings: [2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16](#); [Romans 16:25-27](#); [Luke 1:26-38](#); [Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26](#)

Audio Link: <https://podcasters.spotify.com/pod/show/st-albans-austin/episodes/Advent-7-Sermon-Building-a-House-for-God-e2dnd3k>

Video Link: <https://youtu.be/qbMUv7EXiiA?t=1435>

Thus says the LORD:

Are you the one to build me a house to live in? (2 Sam 7:5)

Please be seated.

Godly Play is the curriculum we use for Sunday school here at St. Alban's. The first time I saw someone tell a Godly Play story, it was at a day-long retreat for people in discernment. These are people asking questions about where God is calling them to be and what God is calling them to become.

They have *some* sense of their spiritual gifts and the kinds of ministry they're drawn to. Now they're trying to assemble these pieces to make a path to whatever is next. With the themes of wondering with an "o" and wandering with an "a" in mind, the retreat leader decided to tell the story of the Great Family, the story of Abram and Sarai.

This story is set in the desert. The retreat was held at someone's house, so she didn't have access to the desert box. It's a giant box on wheels filled with sand, and it's usually a favorite of the kids. Instead, she pulled out a baking sheet and a bag of sand, pieces of blue string for the rivers, wooden figures for the great family, and some rocks. After carefully putting everything in place, she began telling the story.ⁱ

I'd read this story in the Bible. I'd heard this story in church. Watching this story being told on a baking sheet was totally mesmerizing. As she slowly moved the figures, they would leave prints in the sand.

It gave us a sense of the effort required, the distance covered. When they stopped and Abram prayed and God met him in that place, she put down several small stones to represent the altar Abram built to signify that God was there.

They were nomadic people, and these markers were simple and effective. It was a reminder that God was here, and here, and here. And even when God told them to move on, that didn't mean God was no longer there. Abram didn't tear down the altars each time he moved. Those altars, those stones, showed that God *was* in that place, that God is *still* in that place.

Many many many generations later, David wanted to mark God's presence in a different way. After he was finally anointed king over Israel (2 Sam 5:1-5), he and his men marched to Jerusalem and took over the city.

As it is recorded in 2 Samuel, “David occupied the stronghold, and named it the city of David. David built the city all around from the Millo inwards. And David became greater and greater, for the LORD, the God of hosts, was with him. King Hiram of Tyre sent messengers to David, along with cedar trees, and carpenters and masons who built David a house.” (2 Sam 5:9-11).

So, David built up his city. Then he built his house. Then he fought the Philistines. **Then finally** he was ready to bring the ark of God to where he lived. He set out with thirty thousand men.

They placed the ark on a new cart, and they danced in front of the Lord with all their might, with songs and lyres and harps and tambourines and castanets and cymbals. Yes, this is a great way to praise God, he might have been showing off, just a little bit.

On the way back to Jerusalem, the oxen jostled the cart and one of the men driving the cart touched the ark to steady. God struck him dead, maybe because this showed their lack of care—It was supposed to be carried, not outsourced to a cart and oxen, and one of the basic rules was that no one was supposed to touch it.

David was angry about what he saw as God’s overreaction, **and** he also became afraid. He wondered, “How can the ark of the Lord come into my care?” (2 Sam 5:9). Having gotten a taste of the life-and-death seriousness of this task; he got nervous about keeping it close to him. Wouldn’t you?

So, David left the ark with a man named Obed-edom. The ark stayed in that house for three months, and the Lord blessed that household. Once this news got back to David, surprise, surprise, David decided that he did want the ark in his city after all. This time he had people carry it.

They brought it back and set it inside a tent. David made offerings to the Lord, and he blessed the men and women of Israel in the name of the Lord and with a generous portion of food. Having made a big deal out of the ark of God arriving in his city, David starts musing, “See now, I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent.” The prophet Nathan tells him to go with his gut.

That night, the word of the Lord came to Nathan. God tells him, “In all the time that I’ve been with the people of Israel, when have any of you ever heard me say that I wanted a house?”

“You say you want to give me what you have. You want to build me a house of cedar. Is that really for me, or is that for you?”

Basically God is asking, “What are you building, and who are you building it for?”

Given what we know about David, this could be his way of showing his gratitude. He’s just really enthusiastic about praising God. If not for God, he would still be a shepherd, not the shepherd of Israel. We can learn from him and be a little less self-conscious

when it comes to praising God. We can convey the joy and gratitude in our heart in a more vocal, more physical way.

And given what we know about David, he doesn't quite seem like the humble, selfless type. He renamed Jerusalem the City of David. He left the ark behind until he heard that God's blessings were with that household.

Perhaps he wanted to build God a house because he thought this would give him exclusive claim to God's blessing and God's favor. Perhaps it's a way to show that there is something **he** could do for God. Perhaps a God who lived in a tent would reflect poorly on a man of his stature. Whatever his motivations, he wasn't really doing this for God.

For when God talked about making a house for David, God didn't mean a house of cedar, but a house whose throne will be established forever. God didn't care about buildings; God cared about people, as in David's descendants. How different David's story would be if he cared as much about his children or his people as he did following his own desires.

Moreover, God cannot be claimed and hoarded; God moves among the people of Israel. Altars and temples can point us toward God, turn us back to God, but that's for our sake, not for God. Eventually Solomon the son of David built God a fancy temple, but it was destroyed. A Second Temple, built to replace that one, was destroyed roughly four decades after the death of Jesus.

Centuries after the First Temple and around the time of the Second Temple, a young girl named Mary became engaged to Joseph of the house of David. The angel Gabriel came to her and asked if the Son of God could dwell with her, if she would bear the Son of God, to make room for him for the **rest of her life**.

"The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you." She was going to have to nurse the Son of God and sing him to sleep. She was going to have to clean up after him and raise him. She was going to love him for who he was and who he would become. And she was not going to get much credit or praise or gratitude for building this life for him; she will be overshadowed by her son and his father.

This was not something Mary asked for; this was something God asked of her. She listened to the messenger from God, she asked thoughtful questions, then she said, "Yes."

Abraham built God altars of stone, David wanted to build God a house of cedar, and Mary committed her whole body and her very life to God when she said, "Let it be with me according to your word." This was going to affect her reputation, and there is no blueprint for raising a child as there is for building a temple. But she would have companions such as Elizabeth to help her navigate the impossibilities and uncertainties, and as we will hear in tonight's gospel reading, God will *keep* sending her messengers.

As individuals and as a church, it is good to ask ourselves these questions, “What are we building, and who are we building it for?”

At this time of the year, we’re adding up our pledges, and the vestry has passed a budget. As we do this, it’s easy for my focus to narrow until all I can see are the numbers, the amounts coming in and going out and the gap between them. Then I force myself to step back and encourage myself and everyone around me to ask why we spend so much time and effort maintaining these buildings and grounds, why we pay staff to do the work they do.

There are all kinds of ways we can build a house for God. We see God in all kinds of people and all kinds of places.

We don’t have to be all things for all people, we’re not going to be a cathedral, we’re not going to be St. David’s or Jubilee. We’re going to dream up our own way to give our thanks and praise. We’re going to listen to God and to our neighbors to find the match between what they need and what we have to give.

As we reflect back on this year as a church, we’ve done a lot together. We have offered hospitality to strangers, and we have found and formed a family. As we continue to recognize and share the gifts of God’s grace and love, we also seek ways for God to dwell in us and our church.

We have these two buildings, the church and the parish life center. Let’s look for collaborators who share our mission and are looking for a space to make their dreams happen. At the last vestry meeting, our senior warden Rosemary Cole shared her dream that in the next fifteen years we can help address the need for afterschool care and for parents to have a day or night out, that in the next fifty years we’ll plant a church in East Austin where people who haven’t ever gone to church can encounter the love of God as we practice it.

This isn’t about pinning down God here, in this place. This is about **continuing** to build this into a place for prayer and praise, for lament and healing, for receiving and sharing God’s gifts of grace and love. God meets us here, and then God sends us out.

As we look back at everything God has done with us, let’s keep dreaming about where and how God is calling us to meet God’s people, here and in other places. Let’s keep dreaming about what God is calling us into becoming.

May the Holy Spirit come upon us. May the power of the Most High overshadow us. May it be with us according to the Word of God.

Amen.

¹ https://www.saintgregorys.org/uploads/2/4/2/6/24265184/the_great_family.pdf